

PART TWO
WHAT IS MAN THAT YOU
ARE MINDFUL OF HIM?
GENESIS 2:4b - 4:26

Introduction to Genesis 2-4

There is as yet no consensus among scholars as to the origins of the material found in these three chapters (see page 16). However, the incorporation of the text into Genesis as we have it is post-exilic, and this commentary will be looking at it from this perspective.

We are not sharing here in privileged information that gives us the names of the first human couple, and describes how they actually lived in paradise before they sinned. Rather, we have a reflection on what it means to be human, set in contrast to the myths of the Ancient Near East, and from the perspective of Israel's faith. We are offered a reflection on what life could be like if we only listened to God, and on some fundamental dimensions of sin and its terrible consequences for human life. The account no doubt reflects on legends of the patriarchs and on Israel's history, but it is a story which aims to help build a harmonious community in Judah by pointing out the kind of behaviour that must be avoided to be faithful to God's covenant and live the kind of life willed by God.

The authors, as we shall see, make no attempt to tell how evil came into the world. The talking serpent is a figure of fable, not the devil in disguise. Nor are they telling their readers the origin of death. Death is obviously an essential dimension of being human.

The text does say something about human folly, but, as we should expect, the focus is on God and on God's response to our folly. We shall see how loving this is – a lesson the returned exiles needed to hear. The narrative reminded them (and it continues to remind us) that we are destined to live in God's world, and in dependence on God. It insists that the Creator is their own YHWH, the One who hears the cry of the poor. The effects of our sin – portrayed here as punishment – can be corrective because of the mercy of God. But we cannot go on sinning without suffering sin's consequences.

These chapters focus on the limits within which they (and we) must live. If they are going to build a faithful community in post-exile Judah they should live wisely, attentive to God's directions. If they do not, they are in danger of bringing upon themselves a repetition of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the suffering of exile.

The correct question to ask ourselves as we read this material is not 'What is the meaning of these past events to us today?', but 'What are the authors saying about the human condition?'

Though the material which we are about to read has links with myth, the authors are not interested in myth or in its cultic expression, which in the Ancient Near East was mostly conceived as a tool for supporting the 'divine' ruler and the state. The authors of Genesis are interested in history, in human behaviour and responsible action, here formalised in a description of the human-being-as-such [hā 'ādām], and the various basic relationships within which we human beings live out our lives. They assert that we are inclined towards evil (8:21) but they reiterate their conviction that YHWH is intimately involved in human history and that divine mercy, as has just been demonstrated in the return from exile, transcends our sin.

They speak of the paradox of being human: the dust and the spirit, the sanctity and the sin, the wonder and the limitations that we all experience. The meta-historical nature of the writings is highlighted by the fact that there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane, there are no epiphanies, no theophanies, no revelation, and no faith: only direct encounter with God. This is not history; it is story (see pages 10-12). It has something of the feel of ‘once upon a time’.

We have our origin in God, but our communion is disturbed by our choices to go our own way without regard for God’s will for us. The post-exilic authors were especially keen to inculcate a profound obedience to God’s will in the community gathered around the reconstructed temple.

In these three chapters, they are asking: What is God’s design for the human race? Why are we the way we are? Why do we experience this radical ambivalence in our relationship to God? Why is brother fighting against brother: the people of the land against the returned exiles? They are also reassuring the people that failure does not have to have the last word. God’s gift is such that we can be restored to life after failure. Community can be restored.

Having introduced their work with an account of God’s creating action, the authors of Genesis want to stress that the God who is Creator is the God of Israel, YHWH – hence the expression ‘YHWH God’, rarely found outside these chapters. They also want to narrow the focus to God’s intention in creating human beings. Unlike the imagery of the Prologue, which draws on the geography of Mesopotamia, the imagery here is at home in the parched Judean landscape. Scholars draw parallels between the imagery here and that found in the Akkadian myth, the *Enuma Elish*.

The wild vegetation of the wilderness needs rain. The cultivated plants need human care: tilling the soil, drawing water from the wells, and irrigating the land.

None of this was foreign to the experience of the returned exiles, struggling to make a living in the arid country around Jerusalem – all that was left to them of the Judah they remembered.

⁴When YHWH God made the earth and the heavens,

⁵no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb had yet sprung up – for YHWH God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no human being to till the ground;

⁶or to draw water from the earth, or to irrigate the whole face of the ground;

⁷then YHWH God formed the human being from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human being became a living being.

⁸And YHWH God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the human being whom he had formed.

⁹Out of the ground YHWH God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches.

¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold;

¹²and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.

Human beings (*hā 'ādām*) are 'formed' by God from the dust of the ground (*hā 'ādāmâ*). The word 'form' (*yāšar*) is used also for God's action in history, sometimes compared to the work of a potter. We are reminded of Paul who speaks of human beings as God's 'work of art' (Ephesians 2:10). Though perishable – we return to dust (see Psalm 90:3; Psalm 104:30) – we have in us the breath of life, given to us by God. In the words of Job: 'You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in your providence watched over my spirit' (Job 10:12).

To create mankind, God must provide the means of sustenance. God plants a garden. Our word 'paradise' comes from the Greek word used here to translate 'garden', a word of Persian origin and indicating a pleasure garden surrounded by a wall. 'Eden' means 'pleasure' (Genesis 18:12). The garden planted for human beings by God is 'in the east', the direction of the rising sun, the source of warmth and light.

God is abundant in his gifts. The 'tree of life' is a common motif in creation mythology. To eat its fruit would give immortality. The 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil' is unique to this narrative. Its role will become clearer as we read on.

The link between the river and the garden of Eden has an echo in the following: 'There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High' (Psalm 46:4).

There are four rivers because there are four points of the compass: north, south, east and west. The author is saying that all the rivers that bring fertility to the earth have their ultimate source in the river that brings fertility (God's blessing) to the garden planted by God in Eden.

The 'land of Havilah' ('sand'), evokes Arabia, the source of trade in gold, bdellium (a resin) and many precious stones.

‘Cush’ refers here to the lands that stretch south of Egypt.

The Tigris and the Euphrates feature in the Babylonian myth of Atrahasis.

Verse fifteen repeats verse eight, and adds the idea that work is an essential dimension of what it means to be human. Note that, unlike the Babylonian myths, human beings are created simply to till the garden and care for it, not to free the gods from the burden and drudgery of hard labour.

The scene is set. Now the plot begins. The communication between God and humanity is direct, familiar, unmediated. We are reminded first of God’s largesse, but then of an essential element of being human. We can enjoy life only when we are in relationship to God. To say No to God is to say No to life. God’s final words are a warning, not a threat. God wants us to live and warns us that to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil will mean death for us, for it will cut us off from God’s blessing. Do not miss the point that God’s words also mean that God has given us the choice. We are not puppets of fate, or of a controlling deity.

Relating to God is not enough. Human beings are essentially social beings. We need each other. In a special way we need to be loved by someone who can ‘face us’, look into our eyes and know us as we are.

¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush.

¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵YHWH God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

¹⁶And YHWH God commanded the human being, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden;

¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

¹⁸Then YHWH God said, “It is not good that the human being should be alone; I will make him a helper who will face him.”

¹⁹So out of the ground YHWH God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper who would face him.

²¹So YHWH God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.

²¹And the rib that YHWH God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

²³Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his *woman*, and they become one flesh.

²⁵And the man and his *woman* were both naked, and were not ashamed.

The focus throughout this story remains on humanity. Just as in verse nine vegetation is mentioned because of its relationship to human beings, so is it here with the animals and the birds. Naming them indicates that it is God's will that human beings are free to decide how these creatures are to relate to us. The final comment in verse 20 makes it clear that relating to animals and birds, however important, does not constitute the essential relationship that makes a human being truly human. Something more is needed.

In Sumerian (but not in Hebrew) there is a word play between 'rib' and 'woman who makes life'. This suggests that this element of the story has been borrowed. Note that woman is not the result of a second creative act. We are not to read this as the next act in a sequence. The authors are making the obvious point that humanity is made up of man and woman and that neither is complete without the other. Man and woman need each other to continue the blessing and give life.

Up to and including verse twenty-two, the authors have been using the word *hā 'ādām* to refer to the human species. Only in verse twenty-three do we have mention of 'male' ('*īš*), for only here do we have 'female' ('*iššā*). The humanity that God created (2:7) is now revealed as male and female, each incomplete without the other.

Note that the first word uttered by a human being is a cry of delight from a husband to a wife. Basic to being a human being is to enjoy the communion of man and woman: beings who can 'face each other' (2:18) in love. The expression 'bone and flesh' is found also in Genesis 29:14; and in 2Samuel 5:2; 19:13.

Verse twenty-four is an editorial comment on the implications of God's design for human beings. Verse twenty-five acts as a bridge, linking what precedes with what follows, and setting up a tension that is resolved only with 3:7.

To identify the serpent with the devil – an identification made in late Judaism and carried over into Christian thought – is to introduce something alien to the text as it stands. This is a fable, so, like Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:28-30), the serpent speaks. It also includes two associated ideas that were commonly linked with the serpent. Because the serpent sloughs its skin, it was associated with immortality. It was also associated with wisdom. Hence the term 'crafty' (Hebrew 'ārûm).

The 'crafty' serpent distorts God's command. The woman sets him straight, repeating God's command (see 2:16-17). However, she adds the idea of not touching the fruit.

God wants human beings to be wise: to be able to discern between good and evil. In this sense God wants us to share in his wisdom, and so 'be like God'. Wisdom, therefore, is possible, but only if we listen to God and welcome from God a share in God's own wisdom. We are not to 'limit wisdom' to ourselves (see Job 15:8). If we attempt to do that we will 'corrupt' it (see Ezekiel 28:17), and, cutting ourselves off from the source of life, we will die. The woman is tempted to listen to the serpent, rather than God. After all, the serpent knows all about cheating death!

Of course the tree was good for food. God created it. Of course it was a delight to the eyes. God made it so. The problem is that the all-wise God had warned her not to eat from it, and she thought that she knew better. She thought she could be wise independent of God. She followed her desires without due discretion or proper discernment. She failed to understand that being a creature necessarily entails living within limits. The man, too, lacks discernment. The woman was given him by God for support, but there are limits here as well.

¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that YHWH God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

²The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;

³but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"

⁴But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die;

⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

⁸They heard the sound of YHWH God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of YHWH God among the trees of the garden.

⁹But YHWH God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

¹⁰He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

¹¹He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

There is a wordplay in the Hebrew. When they listen to the serpent, instead of becoming 'wise' ('crafty', 'ārûm), they become aware of being 'naked' ('ārôm). Before they ignored God's warning to give in to their own curiosity, they were 'unashamed' (2:25). Now they experience shame. The author is highlighting an essential paradox of the human condition. We cannot stay in a state of naive innocence. We have to grow up to know what is good and what is evil. However, to know evil through experience is to know shame, for it brings with it an experiential knowledge, but also an awareness of our vulnerability and foolishness. The taste of evil brings its own temptation. Nothing can be the same again. We feel the need to hide our nakedness.

We are created to experience a simple and immediate intimacy with God, but that is not the way things are. God is experienced as absent, for we are ashamed and so try to hide ourselves from God. Having unwisely grasped at a freedom that is not in communion with God, we cannot enjoy life as God intends us to enjoy it. We experience being afraid of YHWH (3:10). However God has not abandoned us. Note that the initiative comes from God. Sin makes us ashamed, but it does not cause God to abandon us. This was a lesson the authors wanted their contemporaries to learn. They also wanted to make the point that, however we might try, we cannot hide from God (see Psalm 139).

Notice the repetition of 'I' in verse ten. We are not meant to take on our own shoulders the whole weight of living. It is not good to be alone, but man-woman is not enough. To be truly human we must be in communion with God.

The responses of the man and the woman are true to the narrative, but they do not justify what they have done.

To listen to the serpent is to listen to that part of us that comes from the dust without listening to the life-giving breath that we have received from God. It is to follow desire without discernment. It is to seek experience without the wisdom that comes from God. In Hebrew one can hear the hissing of the serpent in the expression 'the serpent tricked me' (hā 'iššâ hannāḥāš hiššianî).

The serpent is not interrogated. The author does not pretend to explore the ultimate cause of temptation or sin.

The crafty ('ārûm) serpent is cursed ('ārûr). It was thought that serpents eat dust (Isaiah 65:17,25; Hosea 7:17). The fable recounts a common perception of what sets serpents apart from the rest of the animal world, as well as the obvious antipathy and fear that governs our relationship with them.

There is nothing wrong with reading deeper meanings into the text so long as we realise that that is what we are doing. Since Irenaeus, Christian commentators have liked to see in verse fifteen a prophecy of Mary and Jesus. Others follow the Jewish interpreter, Philo, and see the serpent as an embodiment of the devil. Neither of these ideas fits the fable in its context.

In a similar way the fable looks at the condition of woman. In the very area in which she finds a special fulfilment as mother and wife, she experiences pain, physical and emotional. Sin has disturbed the relationship between the sexes. One of the results is male domination. This is the way things are, but it is not the way God designed it to be.

12The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

13Then YHWH God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

14YHWH God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life."

15I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

16To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

¹⁷And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

²⁰The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

²¹And YHWH God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

²²Then YHWH God said, “See, the *human being* has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—

Coming from God’s hand, one would expect vegetation to be ‘pleasant to the sight and good for food’(3:9). In fact, we have to contend with ‘thorns and thistles’, and it can be hard work tilling the soil, as the returned exiles knew only too well. This, too, is seen as a ‘punishment’ for sin.

There is no suggestion in Genesis that we were once intended to be immortal. Death is an essential element of the human condition. God did not threaten them with death. God warned them that if they ate from the designated tree they would die ‘that day’(2:17). Such is God’s merciful kindness that, even though they failed to heed the warning, they did not die ‘that day’. They are to live on, but they are being told that toil and struggle – seen here as the necessary consequence of their refusal to obey – would continue right up to their death.

The fact that it is the man who names the woman (compare 2:19) is a further indication of male domination: an inequality of the sexes that is seen as a result of the disorder resulting from failure to listen to God (see 3:16). They try to cover themselves (2:7). God understands their weakness and their shame. His clothing of them is a lovely touch in the narrative, and another indication of divine compassion. God cannot pretend away the effects of sin, but God can help us cope and make us less vulnerable.

This shows that the narrative never envisaged human beings as being immortal. Typical of the ancient myths is the search for some magical fruit that would give immortality. God is portrayed as accepting that human beings have chosen to know good and evil for themselves by experience. Doubting God’s providence, and thinking they could do without God’s care, they sought their own autonomous well-being. Hence the mess we humans find ourselves in. God realises that they might now take the extra step and try to eat the fruit of the other tree – the tree of life – and so be like God in being immortal. Something has to be done to prevent this.

Things are not the way we would expect them to be in a universe created by God. God breathed into human beings the breath of life, but we end up losing it and returning to the dust. We would expect to live in harmony with the animal world, but this is not always the case. We have to struggle to care for the soil and gain a living from it. All is not right between the sexes. We do not directly experience God and our relationship with God is ambivalent. We do not live out our life in a garden of delight.

The authors of Genesis chapter three do not attempt to explain the ultimate cause of all this. They have recourse to fable. However, they locate the central human failure as a failure to listen to and follow God's word.

The idea of expulsion from Eden may draw on Ezekiel 28:11-19. The picture of the cherubim and the flashing lightning is borrowed from an Akkadian myth.

The idea of a 'Fall' assumes that there was a time before sin when human experience was different from what it now is. The Genesis story, however, is not a description of two different historical conditions. It is a theological narrative. It is viewing reality from an inspired perspective. It asserts the way things should be and would be if it were not for human disobedience. Actual historical experience is that in fact we all do sin, and so things are the way they are.

The idea of the 'Fall' stems from late Jewish speculation. It took various forms: 'O Adam what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone but ours also who are your descendants' (2 Esdras 7:118). 'Do not court death by the errors of your ways, nor invite destruction through your own actions. Death was not God's doing, he takes no pleasure in the extinction of the living. To be - for this he created all' (Wisdom 1:12-14). 'It was the devil's envy that brought death into the world' (Wisdom 2:24). In the Apocalypse of Moses, Eve says: 'All sin has come into creation through me'. In a Rabbinical commentary on Deuteronomy we read: 'Adam brought death into the world' (Deut R.9; 206a). In the second apocalypse of Baruch (54:19) we read: 'Each of us has been the Adam to his own soul.'

²³therefore YHWH God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

²⁴He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

The 'fall'

Paul shared some of this speculation with his contemporaries. In his First Letter to the Corinthians (15:22), he writes: 'As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.' Paul's intention is not to make a dogmatic statement about Adam, but to make use of ideas current at the time to make a statement about Christ. Just as Adam, according to this interpretation, is the first human being in whose seed every human being exists, and just as Adam's death set the pattern for everyone to die, so, because of what Christ has done, every human being is destined to share in the life that Christ received having first gone through death.

In his Letter to the Romans Paul returns to this topic: "As sin came into the world through one person, and death through sin, and so death spread to all because all sinned ... much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one person Jesus Christ overflowed beyond measure for the many" (Romans 5:12, 15). Sin brings about 'death', not the physical breakdown of our system – that was always going to happen, for human beings are not immortal – but 'death' in the sense of separation from God, the source of life. Jesus died, but he never experienced the death of separation from God, for he was sinless. Beyond physical death, Jesus experiences communion with God, and he is offering everyone a share in this communion, this life. Paul is making the point that there is no comparison between the sin and separation from God that has been part of the human condition from the beginning, and the grace of eternal communion with God and life that is offered to everyone by God through Jesus. There is no place for despondency or despair. 'Adam' let sin in and handed on an infected human nature, which we all know from our own experience. We needed someone to reverse the process and introduce a new life into the world. We needed a second 'Adam'. We needed to know that there is another and better way to live as a human being, and we needed the grace to enable us to choose it. The grace has come through Jesus and we gain 'much more' than we lost. So let us welcome and embrace it.

Paul is not setting current speculation in concrete. He is using it to get us to focus on Jesus as the one who shows us what it really means to be a human being, and to assure us that it is possible to live Jesus' life, so long as we open our hearts to welcome the Spirit of God that Jesus is offering us.

The author of this Genesis narrative is reflecting on the tension we human beings experience between the pull of the divine breath and the pull of the dust. The pull of the divine is inviting us into dialogue, possibility, freedom, responsibility, community and transcendence. The pull of the 'ādāmâ, which we share with other living creatures, including the serpent, attracts us to a world without discretion, without choice, without freedom, without dialogue and without community. If we would choose wisely, we must listen to God and obey God's directions. We do not have the wisdom to make our own choices without regard to God, for God is the source of our being, and compassionately guides us to our greatest good, which is experienced in dialogue and communion with God, and so with the whole of creation.

In a world where there are so many differences, it is easy to forget that we are brothers and sisters, from the one stock, and with the one God to whom we are responsible. Differences can easily lead to rivalry and to conflict. In chapters two and three the authors of Genesis dealt with what can go wrong in our relationship with God. Here they examine what can go wrong in our relationships with each other.

The authors of the story of Cain and Abel had plenty to draw on in the ancient legends and in Israel's history. We might think of Esau and Jacob, of Joseph and his brothers and of the rivalries and violence in David's family. Relevant also was the envy and the bitterness that existed between the returned exiles and the locals.

God is concerned with what we do and is in dialogue with us, inviting us to face up to our reality and act morally. The authors are clearly fascinated by the struggle between creation and destruction, between promise fulfilled and regret at failure. There is the apparent paradox that it is God's blessing that leads to human creativity and expansion, which it turn seems to issue in arrogance, sin and the rejection of the blessing.

The verb translated 'knew' (yādā) refers to that special knowledge that is the result of a personal encounter. The name 'Cain' (qayin) relates to the verb 'to acquire' (qānā). It speaks of ownership and power. One thinks of the Canaanite god Baal, the god of prosperity. Eve recognises that in giving birth she is not acting independently, but is experiencing the blessing that she has received from God. Eve's cry of joy echoes the earlier cry of Adam (see 2:23).

The name 'Abel' speaks of breath, the breath of life that is fleeting (see Psalm 144:4). It is passing, but it is still the breath of God (see 2:7). Cain offers part of his produce to God, but to acquire more power, forgetting that 'the earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it' (Psalm 24:1). Right from the beginning of Genesis we are witnessing sibling rivalry, a key theme of the whole book. The opposition here is between the will to life and the will to power. 'Choose life that your descendants may live' (Deuteronomy 30:29).

No reason is given for God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and non-acceptance of Cain's. This, too, is part of the human condition. Why do some people suffer while others live a charmed life? Why are some people born into a poor family and others into a comfortable one? Life is unfair. How are we to respond to it?

¹Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have acquired a man with the help of YHWH."

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

³In the course of time Cain brought to YHWH an offering of the fruit of the ground,

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

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

Brother against brother

⁶YHWH said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?"

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."

⁸Cain 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.

⁹Then YHWH said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

¹⁰And YHWH said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"

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

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

YHWH's question highlights the fact that Cain has choices, and that he is capable of doing well. The fact that God has apparently disregarded his offering does not mean that he is unacceptable to God. He can do well by mastering his envy, for only reconciliation will work. This was a lesson the community in post-exilic Judah had to learn. Or he can open the door to sin by giving in to it. The image of sin as a lion waiting in ambush ready to spring is a striking one.

The crime is stated with stark simplicity. Taking the life of one's brother through envy and anger is just as irrational as wanting to be like God without due dependence on God. But that is how human beings behave.

The question 'Where is your brother?' ('āhîkā) echoes the question addressed to the man and woman: 'Where are you?' ('ayyekâ, 3:9). Cain lies in an attempt to cover up his crime. Nothing, however, is hidden from YHWH, who hears the cry of those who are oppressed.

The choices we make have consequences that we cannot pretend away. In the earlier scene the ground was cursed (3:17), but not the man. So dreadful is the crime of killing one's brother that the perpetrator himself is cursed; that is to say, he is cut off from the community lest his action pollute others. An individual cut off from the community cannot survive. The community in exile in Babylon knew what it was like to be banished from home, like Adam and Eve, and now Cain.

YHWH hears the cry of those who are oppressed – including those whose condition is the result of their own behaviour. God does not abandon us when we fail. The Hebrew word ‘awôn, translated here as ‘punishment’ includes the elements of sin and guilt. Cain fears that he will be cut off from God, and that anyone will be free to take his life.

The authors insist that God hears Cain’s cry too. He is not cut off from God, and others are not at liberty to take his life. That would be to add crime to crime. It would only continue the spiral of violence. Cain is assured that God would punish any revenge killing. As far as others are concerned Cain is untouchable.

Cain, like Adam and Eve, is excluded from the intimate communion that is characteristic of a primeval paradise. This is the way things are in the real world that we inhabit. His communion with God is the mediated communion with which we are familiar. He lives out his existence – don’t we all – in the ‘land of wandering/restlessness’ (‘Nod’).

The New Testament use of this story takes over from the interpretations current in late Judaism.

And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth,
from the blood of righteous Abel
to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah,
whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

– Matthew 23:35

Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.
And why did he murder him?
Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous.

– 1John 3:12

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.
By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings.
And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.

– Hebrews 11:4

You have come to God, the judge of all men,
to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,
to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant,
and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

– Hebrews 12:23-24

¹³Cain said to YHWH, “My punishment is greater than I can bear!

¹⁴Today 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.”

¹⁵Then YHWH said to him, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.” And YHWH put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²³Lamech 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.

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

Chapter four verses seventeen to twenty-four show an interest in genealogy, which is a key feature of the Pentateuch. Note that this is a 'once upon a time' genealogy, not a tribal one. It is concerned, not with a specific people, but with the human race and the development of its civilisation and cultural achievements. Every people, including Israel, shares in these common achievements.

From Adam to Lamech (4:1, 17-18) is seven generations, symbolic of fullness. The names are not Hebrew ones. Many exegetes suggest a Babylonian origin. It is likely that the original intention of verse seventeen was to attribute the building of a city to Enoch, whose name may mean 'founder'. Cities developed out of farming communities (Cain is a farmer, see 4:2).

'Adar' may mean 'beauty of face'; Zillar may mean 'sweetness of voice': typical ways of praising feminine beauty. In separating Adar and Zillar the genealogy separates the life of the nomad, with its music and dancing, from the origins of metallurgy and technology. The name of Zillar's daughter, 'Naamah', echoes the words *nā'ēm* ('to be pleasing') and *nā'îm* ('singing').

In verses twenty-three and twenty-four a song is inserted to conclude the genealogy. The bragging of Lamech, intended to intimidate enemies, and the link back with the narrative of Cain (4:2-16), highlights the paradox that the development of civilisation increases our capacity to alienate and oppress one another. If we are going to survive, vengeance must be contained. Is Jesus alluding to this text when he tells Peter that he must forgive: 'not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times' (Matthew 18:22)?

Here we have a new start with Seth. The blessing continues. Both 'Adam' and 'Enosh' are collective nouns, and both are used for 'humanity'. Here, without the article, for the purposes of the story, they represent persons.

Of special interest is the final sentence. The author is not intending to give the historical origins of the worship of YHWH. The whole context is primeval ('Once upon a time ...'), not historical. Rather, he is asserting the origins of religious cult, identifying God here with the one whom the people of Israel later called YHWH. The author recognises that worship of God is an essential dimension of what it means to be a human being.

This has a special importance for the returned exiles who were attempting to set up a community centred on the temple.

²⁵Adam 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."

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