

# Cain and Abel

Conversations with a  
well-travelled text and  
a multi-character God

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# Chapter 1: Setting the Task

This study arose within the life of a local church and its community. It was generated by the practice of ministry, in the context of Sunday worship, when people's lives and work are brought into intentional interaction with their faith and with the Bible text that feeds their faith. The original locus of this study therefore cannot claim to speak definitively on behalf of all, or even some, other people, but it is a 'real-life' community feeling its way in the contemporary scene.

## **Worship: Where Life and Faith Interact**

Although the specifics of our issues and questions may be distinctive to us, in the overall task of seeking life and livelihood as individuals and communities we are far from unique. As Christians within our community, we ask questions of our faith and we bring our concerns with us to Sunday worship in the hope that we will receive some kind of divine insight. This is faith's way in Christian congregations wherever they are located. This has been the life of faith for peoples of faith throughout the centuries and it is this common task that may make this book of some value to a range of readers. One thing this project does assume, however, is some experience of connection to a faith community, probably Christian but not necessarily so in so far as the interactive nature of faith and life may be true to other religions also. It may be a connection with a faith community that is current and active, or the connection has been lost with some searching for reasons and alternatives, or perhaps a more basic level of simply wondering whether a gathered community at worship could offer anything relevant to spiritual needs. Is it possible for the faith of one's heritage to offer resources for life in the world as we encounter it today? Is there any life-enhancing point of connection between the issues we face and the ancient texts of traditional faith?

My invitation to readers is to join us if you will on this journey that begins in our place. It is the place where we pit our lives against the biblical text that propels our faith and we ask that text to speak in God's voice words of comfort and insight, courage and encouragement for our situation. Motivated by the persistence of our concerns and by the conviction that the Bible does have something to say but unsure of how we can know what it is saying, the journey takes us to the academic world of scholars and its research into history, rhetoric, details of text and themes of theology. From there we return to the local situation with its concerns both distinctive and global, to the same place as before, but a different place because of the journey

that has been made. The place feels the same yet different, the issues are the same but the atmosphere and the response is different because of gains in breadth of perspective and depth of introspection. For as a form of Action-Reflection this journey definitely comes back to the old place because it involves a return to action, but it is to new action, with a renewed sense of purpose in putting questions to the biblical text with a view to hearing God's word in the conversations that ensue and turning that word into faithful life-giving action.

But there is still something problematic about this process that needs to be identified. It is reason for making the journey yet it questions its feasibility. This exercise in Action-Reflection operates at the interface of scholarship and the practice of ministry: it entails interaction between the erudition of the University and the interests of the local church. What do biblical scholarship and the worship life of a local congregation have to do with each other? Do they not live in different worlds? The work of scholars seems alien to many lay people in regard to the technicalities of its language and the pedantic precision of its arguments. Abstract theory appears to be a million miles away from the pressing concerns of daily existence. The impression among many of the faithful of the church is that, even though these people may be experts in speaking about the Bible, what they are saying is simply irrelevant, at which point the conversation closes and shrewd clergy keep quiet about their academic interests. What is more, even if a preacher does mine the relevance within scholarly research, is it worth the effort when it means presenting interpretations of texts so different from traditional understanding that they cause uproar among faithful listeners? Is the complexity of scholarly research so essential to it that it is impossible to introduce scholarship to people without the educational background to match it? Perhaps there is a separate category called 'simple faith' or, perhaps more acceptably, 'practical faith', with which scholarship can operate only in a tangential relationship. But to top it all there is this question: have preachers in local situations any chance of keeping up with biblical research when it keeps changing its views on history, structure, form, function and methods of interpretation?

But even if local churches were to reject the experts in the biblical field, some major questions for weekly worship would remain. How does one decide how best to interpret texts to be read in congregational worship? What can be used as a reliable guide for faithful reading? There is such an enormous choice of resources available, through church denominational agencies, para-church groups, internet sites and book retailers, for example. How is one to choose among these, and choose well? Is it a case of following instinct or theological preference or

what seems to suit our congregation? As a person who regularly leads Sunday worship, I have a grave concern that it might be simply my preferences, my theology that dictates the direction of biblical interpretation.

So what does one say week by week at church and say it with integrity? Where are we to find the best words to express insight and perspective, comfort and challenge for the faithful followers of the Christian way who come looking for something to help them? For they clearly seek some kind of signpost, or lighthouse, or even just a glimpse in imagination of the horizon of hope their faith promises them.

### **Why an Old Testament Focus in a Christian Context?**

If a *prima facie* case has been presented for taking a closer look at academic research in relation to the Bible texts featuring in local congregational worship, this simply opens up space for another question in relation to the topic at hand. Why choose Old Testament study to help the cause of Christian Worship? I have heard both sides of the coin on this issue: ‘What we need is more attention given to the Old Testament readings in the lectionary’ and ‘There is too much emphasis on the Old Testament in the church nowadays’. Also, in the public forum of a University Campus I have observed with some sadness sharp interactions between Old Testament scholars and those who claim that the Christ of the New Testament moves beyond the mistakes and limitations of the Old. Even if there is a place in universities for studying the Old Testament in its own right, has not the New Testament taken precedence within the Church and, therefore, within the Church’s worship? One response concerns the matters of reading biblical texts with a view to hearing God speak for one’s context. Discoveries made in relation to the Old Testament in terms of how we read texts will be relevant to whatever Bible, or part of the Bible, we read. Another response is perhaps even more significant. The Old Testament helps develop discipline in reading a text with respect for its differences and its difficulties, i.e. on its own terms as well as with the readers’ own convictions. With the New Testament, the temptation for Christians is to read it too simply and too dogmatically. In other words, because it contains the stories and proclamation of Christ, and therefore presents the core of the Christian faith, it can give the impression of immediate access to the truth about Christ, with no felt need to inquire more deeply and ask the most crucial question of faith, viz. who is this Christ for those we read the text and for how they lives their lives. With the Old Testament, there are other people who read the same or similar texts as their own holy book. The Jewish people and their different focus for

reading make us aware that when we read these texts we cannot expect them to speak without variation or ambiguity, nor to hand to us transparent and definitive statements of dogma. To take the singular view on the Old Testament that such expectations entail would be to disparage the people who read it in a different way. The existence of Judaism reminds us that the Bible is many books and these books contain the stories of different peoples. There are many stories and many threads of stories, and they are so diverse that they are sometimes conflicting.

What is more, the God of the Old Testament is the God of Jesus Christ. It seems to me that this is a major reason for wanting to understand the Old Testament better. For its stories reveal conceptions of the God that Jesus pledged his life and loyalty to. He loved this God whom the scriptures present through such a variety of conflicting threads of memory. *He* could love and trust a God who sometimes seems to be in conflict with God's self, so perhaps Christian readers can learn from him how to love and trust the New Testament's version – the Christ-shape of God. For an honest assessment of the texts of the New Testament indicates that headaches for interpreters of the Old Testament do not cease with the coming of Jesus. The New Testament witness to the life of Jesus and to Christian proclamation about Jesus is also multi-threaded and involves a compilation of diverse memories. Again it is the case that Christians can learn from the Old Testament how to hear God's word in the midst of differing voices and perspectives contained also in the New Testament. It is an opportunity to be honest about the difficulties of interpreting the early Christian witness to the Christ, a witness that is ambiguous and even contradictory and needs the open engagement of a searching reader if the life-giving is to be discovered anew each time the text is approached in the midst of life's needs and concerns.

### **Why Genesis 4?**

So to the question: why this particular text of all texts? One answer is the facile one: 'why not?' But it is reasonable to ask: why is Genesis 4 not included in the standard lectionaries of the churches? Its absence from lectionaries used, and the lack of an opportunity within the lectionary to explore the opening books of Genesis with any sense of continuity, was the primary reason it arose as a topic of study. How could one read and reflect upon the ending of Genesis 3 without moving on to Genesis 4. Congregations have heard innumerable sermons on Eden and the despatch of the two human beings from the Garden, but very few, in recent years, on the drama that the text chooses as its sequel. Yet the characters Cain and

Abel are fairly well-known even beyond the church orbit and appear to be part of the cultural memory of Western societies, like David and Goliath and Moses and the Red Sea. Perhaps their story is considered too unsavoury for regular church use. In contrast to Genesis 4, Genesis 3 has been read and sermonised extensively, with a predominant emphasis on sin and a personal relationship with God – and the individualism this entails - while neglecting the text that follows and any possible connections or developments it might reveal. For in this subsequent text we find the interest extends into relationships between human beings, their ability to find life from the soil and the concern and compassion of God for humans, especially given the mess they can make of their lives. Genesis 4 has an acute contemporaneousness about it. At any point in the history of the earth since human beings joined it – including our own - this story depicts the tragic reality of violence. Furthermore, in addition to vivid depiction, it gives its readers some clues to the options open to human beings if they would use their knowledge of good and evil, as well as being realistic about the consequences of violence and the way violent reactions to life's problems narrow the options for life to proliferate into the future.

Genesis 4 also attracted the attention of the rural community where the writer resides at a very down to earth level. Its main characters are our own kind, viz. people who work the soil and care for the stock who graze pasture lands. Every harvest season the local church faces the sensitive task of assessing how everyone is faring in order to decide what kind of “Harvest Thanksgiving” Service should be held. We want to ensure that we are not asking people who are hurting to celebrate, but at the same time we need to allow those who are smiling to be generous in their thankfulness and in their gifts of money and produce. Relationships between those involved in different types of farming have always been a significant factor in rural communities and their churches. Attitudes towards other people and farming types influence interaction at more than just a business level, with repercussions in sports and service clubs, schools, local bodies, pubs, indeed all areas of community life. Attitudes towards farmers, and farmers' attitudes to ‘townies’, have a wider social effect in a country whose economy has relied heavily on agriculture and arguably still does. Close relationships are hard to build when envy, resentment, self-pity, or a sense of inferiority interferes. But the insights of Genesis 4 are not confined to the farming situation. This is a significant social issue that needs to be faced, viz. attitudes between different ways of making a living across the board in our communities and our society. Envy, resentment, self-pity and feelings of inferiority are the roots of much of the distrust, conflict and indeed the violence that threatens

to rule our social and interpersonal world. What better text could there be with which to search our hearts, and to reach out to the heart of God?

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In the pluralistic world we now live in, society faces temptations similar to those disturbing theology. On the one side sits the trap of interpreting difference as polarization, making a binary split among diverse types to form two opposing constituencies at odds with each other in the public arena. On the other side sits the trap of perceiving difference as fragmentation, with little or no common ground and an overall retreat of individuals and family units into the private arena. But these traps can be subverted. The local community that seeded this study can provide a practical example of that. Aided by extensive community participation in strategic planning promoted by the local District Council, and by a culture of public debate on economic and social issues, the particular community in which this study originated has been able to name its economic and demographic diversity as strength. Its aim is to preserve the best of the past that is carried in its traditional rural ethos as well as encourage diversification for the sake of a healthy future both economically and socially. The community is a district in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, blessed as an agricultural region, with productive foothills and widely irrigated plains, and further blessed by the other string to its economic bow, an international ski area. But this is a community that has learnt to interpret its diversity not in terms of division (e.g. between the old guard of the traditional farming community and the new entrepreneurs of adventure tourism) nor in terms of the absence of community bonding, neither polarization nor fragmentation. The unity of grief and continuing support following the deaths, within six months of each other, of two toddlers, one from a tourism-industry family and the other from a farming family, showed the error of thinking our sense of community has gone.

But it does require effort to maintain diversity as strength. The speed of economic and social change and the seamless web of global communication and interaction leaves local communities with a task that is perplexing in its complexity, viz. juggling the diverse needs and interests of a fluid and heterogeneous constituency. There is an allure about the traps on either side of the community-in-diversity path – the polarizing tug and the fragmenting wrench. For there is a simplicity in each of these options, and a false sense of security in treating difference as either a battle to be fought against the other or a matter of loyalty only to one's own kind.

For all communities tackling these realities of pluralism, and learning to live in multi-cultural respect for one another, Genesis 4 is both a minefield to tread carefully through and a mine of treasure to be uncovered.

## Chapter 2: The Story of Cain and Abel

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the LORD." Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, 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, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If 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."

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. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the LORD said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 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." Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! 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." Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! 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. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch. To Enoch was bore Irad; and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech. Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who make all kinds of bronze and iron tools. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

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

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. To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 4:1-26, New Revised Standard Version, Oxford University Press, New York: 1991

## A Reading of the Text

By the end of Genesis 3 earth creature Adam and companion Eve have joined the real world. It is the world as *we* know it, a mixture of blessing and curse. Cursed in the experience of disruption to God's original dream and continuing risk thereto: relationships break, crops fail – as we soon find out - and violence terrorises. Blessed in its potential for good inter-connected earth-based living because we are assured that the God who dreams life into being continues to care.

So we are not to wallow in the error of Eden. It is hard labour outside Eden and even the land finds it costly to sustain life. But the first verse of Genesis 4 alerts us that the original blessing of the life-giver – “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) - still holds. Conception and birth make their first appearance: two new lives – Cain and Abel.

In adulthood Cain and Abel represent two ancient - and modern - ways to live off the land: Abel, the keeper of sheep, and Cain, the tiller of the soil; stock and crop; animals and plants. In the course of time these two people naturally take a look at the results of their labours to assess their achievements. It seems it has not been an easy year (which year is?): we are not told the lambing percentage but it was probably not a good one; we sense that the yields of grain and seed are poor in quantity or quality or both, a hassle to harvest and hard grind to clean ready for use as food or as next season's seed. But in the nature of stock farming you can always select out your best from the flock and be proud of it even in a poor season, because you will be sure to have some prime lambs. It is the overall picture rather than the specifics that is worse than in the (perhaps mythical) good year. However, with plant crops, it shows up in the whole crop that then has to be assessed for use at a lesser grade.

“It's not fair,” says Cain the agriculturalist. “Abel's better off than I am.” (Doubtless if there were a dairy farmer within range, that one would be keeping very quiet about even better fortunes!) Now in a good year there would be no issue. When everyone is prospering, all can feel positive and confident of their worth as a farmer. But in poorer years, envy, self-pity and self-doubt are inclined to enter the scene – “sin is lurking at the door” (v.7)

“But you must master it” says the voice of wisdom (v.7). God is trying to get Cain to face the reality of life outside Eden. He needs to focus on finding good life where it can be found, turn his efforts to recognising the blessings that do exist instead of getting hung up on the problems. But Cain cannot get the point. He reacts in what proves to be the way of least

resistance, then and now: lashing out. It seems it is easiest to set himself apart from the world around him but, by doing that, he cannot help sensing everything he has separated himself off from as antagonistic towards him. All he can do therefore is take a swing at the world that is not pleasing him.

When God moves in to raise questions about the violent act that ensues, Cain dismisses God's first question with a bit of a joke: does my brother, a keeper of sheep, need a keeper? In fact, this sums up his error of denying any connection between himself and his brother; he is no brother to Abel. But there can be no escaping the consequences of such a disconnected, uncaring act. With Abel's blood is poured into it, the earth itself - the very topsoil that gives life if care and labour are given to it - cries out against the murder. Cain's act of violence is so contrary to God's original vision of life as an interconnected giving and receiving from earth and from human companions that Cain cannot now return to normal life. Violence has knocked him out of the web so he becomes a placeless person, a constant wanderer, with no roots and no base.

And yet God's care continues. The mark of Cain is an ancient expression of God's commitment even to the vagrant, indeed to all outsiders of any society's norms and systems. There is therefore no need to fear what is perhaps the ultimate fear, namely the fear of being totally alone, disconnected and unwanted. Perhaps that was Cain's problem: perhaps he feared rejection most of all. He thought he had been rejected because his farming efforts were not as good as Abel's, and he therefore disposed of his competition. If only he had known what he found out when it was too late to make a difference, after violence had taken over. If only he had known that he was not in competition for God's favour. God would always be there for him because there really is no competition for God's blessing.

### **A Question of Legitimacy**

A fanciful reading of the text of Genesis 4? Perhaps the word 'creative' might be permitted, or 'interesting'. But it has to be granted that it is *relevant*, one of the great catch-cries of the contemporary church scene. It relates to lived experience and I can vouch for that because it arose directly out of interaction between text and a specific context. The context was March 2002 in Mid-Canterbury, New Zealand (i.e. harvest time) in the worship of a congregation with actual crop farmers sitting beside actual stock farmers, some who are both with farmers enjoying the boom in dairying also present. What is more, after a number of years of poor returns sheep and beef farmers were at last feeling good about themselves and their prospects.

Crop farmers, however, were having another battle of a season, with anxiety over getting crops in during the short spells of fine weather, dressing out the rubbish caused by disease and weeds, and realising financial returns that would justify their efforts.

But is this a valid interpretation of an ancient text that has echoed with its warnings and wisdom, its connotations and conflicts in the likely thousands of years since it was first shared as a tale? This interpretation may be interesting to some people, but it will probably be not at all interesting to others. It might indeed be accused of being an *eccentric* interpretation, which would not be a surprise to its interpretive source, given that farming people in many parts of the world often feel treated as off-centre, i.e. peripheral to the primary concerns of globalised society and its economics. Eccentric, interesting, but is it legitimate to tell the story this way? Is it true to the text?

This calls for an honest return to the ‘bare’ text to notice how little it says and how much we bring to it from past interpretation and our own past experience of life. It seems this text has been used to tell so many ‘eccentric’ stories that we expect its words to say more than they can say simply as they stand in the book of Genesis. As a drama in its own right it tells of sex between two people, the birth of two sons, their action as adults of offering their respective life and work to God, a good response for one and not the other, God’s advice for dealing with negative reactions, Cain’s rejecting the advice and killing Abel, God’s accusation and remedy, followed by the continuation of life in both constructive and destructive ways among Cain’s descendants and a new start with a third son called Seth.

The text does not give reasons for the divine approval of Abel and disapproval of Cain for the sacrifices they brought. It says nothing about one being a better than the other, their sacrifices or their intentions being of different quality, nor that their occupations were the point of difference in God’s favour. They each brought their means of subsistence without pressure or prescriptions. Perhaps, as Westermann suggests, it was simply “unthinkable to accept the produce without some such gift or acknowledgement”.<sup>2</sup> The text itself does not say why they did it.

Yet the text in its vocabulary and its narrative structure can be heard to speak a great deal. The Earth Creature and the Mother of all Living put their new knowledge into action, and a child, or rather a “man” (*ish*), is born. The woman (not the man as in Genesis 2) names him *qayin*, one she has acquired or perhaps even created in cahoots with *YHWH*. Soil (*adamah*)

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<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, Augsburg, Minneapolis: 1984, 295.

and *YHWH* create *adam* in Genesis 2; Woman (*ishshah*) and *YHWH* create *ish* in Genesis 4. By the end of the chapter she is giving birth for a third time, but her speech is much more subdued with creative power all attributed to *YHWH*. Something seems to have happened in between. But back with the joyful announcement of the first-born, we are then informed that she gives birth to a second, “Cain’s brother” named *hebel*. Nothing more needs to be said for one whose name means “a breath of air”, perhaps something, perhaps nothing, the source and sign of life but oh so transient. The legacy of the previous chapters is clearly shown in these blessings of continuing life but also in the curse of the soil. The *adamah* proves not just hard labour but a face-collapsing disappointment in what it produces. When things go wrong, even worse than they went wrong in the garden, and murder happens, the soil gains a voice to make known the truth and shuts itself off entirely as a source of livelihood for the one who was previously dependent upon it.

Beyond this immediate literary context, Genesis 4 has held literary conversations with a wide range of biblical texts, in Hebrew Scripture, the New Testament and Inter-testamental literature. Finding livelihood from the soil will be the renewed task for Noah and his family after the Flood. The major prophetic theme of right action rather than sacrifice perhaps betrays links with editors of the Genesis text located in exilic and post-exilic Israel. Similar editorial connections show up in a Wisdom theme of good counsel in at least inchoate form within Genesis 4, and memories of Cain, the acquired one, and Abel, the whiff of air, could in turn bring a new slant to Qohelet’s life of acquiring knowledge only to reach ultimate absurdity (Ecclesiastes). The Inter-testamental book, Jubilees, retells the story as a lesson in God’s judgment. Hebrews sees faith as the core issue (11:4), and Abel’s death a sacrifice that speaks, although Jesus’ blood speaks better (12:24). Matthew assumes righteousness in Abel (23:35), while Jude condemns Cain’s way as that of irrational animals, knowing by instinct and acting only for gain (Jude 10-11).

This is indeed, as Judith McKinlay puts it, “a text that has travelled”.<sup>3</sup> At multiple times and places since its beginnings as a written text (perhaps as late as the Persian period), and before that as oral tale (perhaps as early as the dawning of human civilisation), the story of Cain and Abel has spoken and been spoken to. It travels and speaks whenever the drama and genealogy it contains interact with a context that takes an interest in it, whenever it presents itself as a response to the issues that predominate in a particular time and place, with potential

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<sup>3</sup> Personal conversation while working on this study at the University of Otago.

answers to pressing questions. Interest arises in a multiplicity of contexts because of both how little the text says in itself and how much it says in its language and narrative interconnections, both realised in biblical and rabbinical texts and potential in wider literature and thought. For in common with the Bible as a whole - Hebrew Scripture/Old Testament and New Testament - Genesis 4 contains multiple strands of meaning and pronouncement, witnessing to different perspectives and agendas. These are sometimes so diverse that they come into conflict and threaten the stability of the biblical narrative itself. But this is the very nature of narrative, of texts which “contain within themselves the threads of their own unravelling.”<sup>4</sup> David Gunn and Danna Fewell continue:

Language is always slipping. In order to make a point, the narrator must always imply a counterpoint. To construct the narrative world the narrator must suppress something – something that a suspicious reader may choose to dig up.

It is a drama with a particular plot and characters and a genealogy that includes those characters with a particular view taken on their place in human memory. And among the characters, and the contributors to the genealogy, is someone specifically called *YHWH*, a.k.a. God. More often than not it seems to be assumed that God is the author, the playwright so to speak, and therefore cannot also be considered as a character within the text. Or God is simply not considered in the list of characters. But leaving aside the question whether God is the author or not, God is definitely a character within the drama of Cain and Abel and a participant in the genealogy (“I have acquired a man with the Lord” v.1). We would surely miss a large portion of the text’s power to engage if we left this character out of our reckonings and do not pay specific attention to God’s actions and reactions. We would miss its full potential to transform. It seems to be that conflating the roles of author and character has created confusion about the role of God and has put barriers in the way to clear conversations with the text, reducing our chances of receiving fresh insights with life-giving outcomes, as opposed to death-dealing ones, or even outcomes that are not obviously deathly but are stuck in vested interests and prejudices. To the reader it is not automatically obvious which attributes and qualities of God belong with the character in the text and which are carried in by the reader’s “loyalty to established dogma concerning the divinity”<sup>5</sup> and our preconceptions about what an omnipotent Author needs to be like. As readers we run the risk that the God we take to the text is the God we set up to suit ourselves.

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<sup>4</sup> David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1993, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 28.

Walter Brueggemann argues that “the God of the Bible is not ‘somewhere else’, but is given only in, with, and under the text itself”.<sup>6</sup> That is, we are invited to approach the text with the prior request made – and permission given - to leave aside all assumptions and prejudices about God. We are to let go the ‘somewhere else’ God who is not so much the absolute, perfect reality that we might think it is, but is more often than not our own requirements re-packaged as God to suit ourselves. We are invited to meet the God of the Bible, ‘as is where is’. My argument for this is that it allows readers to relate to the Bible and connect with its narratives without feeling immediately threatened in personal terms. As a reader, I do not have to resist whatever the Bible says that disturbs my world-view or conflicts with my values, because, initially, I am just entertaining the ideas and world it presents to me. I do not feel compelled to be selective and to filter out what contravenes established beliefs, what does not compute with my pre-installed God-word-check and God-grammar-check. Instead, I can give God the graciousness of a good hearing: let the story and its God set the pace and take responsibility for proceedings, and leave assessment of this God and God’s actions in relation to my life, beliefs and values to follow. As indeed it will: reader-response interaction with a text entails self-assessment happening almost without the reader noticing it. Without the resistance of the usual absolute terms and conditions one might use to monitor and prejudge everything one is involved in, interaction with the text has considerable power to transform.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 1997, 19.

## Chapter 3: Interpreting Genesis 4

The history of biblical interpretation has revealed that this is a text of multiple interpretations. David Gunn and Danna Fewell identify Genesis 4 as a prime example in this history of interpretation with its “play of continuity and discontinuity over two millennia.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is not simply a matter of different interpretations of the Genesis 4 text, but different issues and different points of reference for entry to the text and for considering its message. How the text is read depends upon the questions interpreters are asking.

### Issues with the Sacrifice

Why did God disregard Cain’s sacrifice? What was the problem with it? Perhaps there was something wrong with Cain or something right with Abel that needed showing up.

One compelling response is that, just as the text makes no issue of the sacrifice, so it is of no concern to the narrator. It is, for example, a narrative means to get to the real point of concern, namely, how to respond to experiences like failure, rejection and feeling disadvantaged. But many interpreters seem to have ignored how little the text says about the whys and wherefores of the sacrifice and speculated on it at length. They may have noticed the narrative silence but felt it inappropriate to disregard the noise within their own reading of it or to silence their own questions about God’s justice at this early point in the story. Perhaps it is primarily a plot mechanism but it throws up its own issues, even if inadvertently or unintentionally. As a narrative means to a narrative end it would appear to be a risky interpretative procedure to deny god’s rejection of Cain’s sacrifice a place in the overall interpretation of the passage. For does the end always justify the means for a narrator? How something is achieved as part of a biblical plot could itself be questionable, especially if it hints at injustice on the part of one of the characters involved – God?

Gordon Wenham notes that “the commonest view among commentators, ancient and modern, is that it was the different approach to worship that counted and that this was reflected in the quality of the gifts.”<sup>8</sup> Philo latches on to the phrase “in the course of time” (v.3) to suggest that Cain made his sacrifice when he got round to it, with no urgency nor any sense of priority. For Genesis Rabba “some of the fruit of the ground” (v.3) is a phrase in contrast to Abel’s “firstlings and fat portions” (v.4), inferring that Cain only brought leftovers. Many

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<sup>7</sup> Gunn and Fewell, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol 1 Genesis 1-15*, Word Books, Waco, Texas: 1987, 104.

have argued, following the New Testament book of Hebrews that it is *faith* that makes the difference for Abel. According to Robert Daly, the type of sacrifice involved is *minha*, in which the acceptance of the sacrifice is binding on the one who accepts. Daly argues therefore that “running through this passage... is the unmistakable idea that the good conduct and intentions of the offerer are of paramount importance for the divine acceptance of him and his offering.”<sup>9</sup> Within the context of the religious practices predominating in the Hebrew Scriptures, the sacrifices of these two people “suggest propitiation, that is, an offering to ward off divine wrath, to encourage the deity’s favor, to invoke his blessings of prosperity.”<sup>10</sup> The view of Umberto Cassuto who distinguishes between doing one’s duty well and just doing one’s duty<sup>11</sup> is commended by Kenneth Craig and Shamai Gelandner believes “that intentions is the key to Cain’s conflict with God.”<sup>12</sup> In fact the narrator’s silence on the details of Cain’s experience of God’s disfavour is itself indicative for Gelandner of a personal, internal element:

In recounting about Cain’s response without telling us how Cain knew, the narrator has indicated that this is self-evident: Cain knew the reason by himself. In the worship of God one knows – or rather feels – if one is accepted, by simply knowing whether one’s worship has been wholehearted.<sup>13</sup>

Some interpreters have inferred a radical character fault in Cain, developed in his own past history or as an inheritance from his parents. For John Calvin the blame rests squarely with Adam and the text is a lesson that fits squarely within a theology of judgment.<sup>14</sup> For Philo it was a case of virtue (Abel) versus vice (Cain): “virtuous, God-centred thought triumphs over vicious, self-centred senses.”<sup>15</sup>

A number of interpreters relate the categories of virtue and vice are related directly to the occupations of the two brothers. Shepherds are better people than agriculturalists, or so, it is argued, people of biblical times – the text’s narrators and editors – believed. “One of them labours and takes care of living beings... gladly undertaking the pastoral work which is preparatory to rulership and kingship. But the other occupies himself with earthly and

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<sup>9</sup> Robert J. Daly, S.J., *Christian Sacrifice: The Judeo-Christian Background before Origen*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington: 1978, 78.

<sup>10</sup> Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London: 1997, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth M. Craig Jr, “Questions Outside Eden (Genesis 4.1-16): Yahweh, Cain and their Rhetorical Interchange”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 86 (1999), 111.

<sup>12</sup> Shamai Gelandner, *The Good Creator: Literature and Theology in Genesis 1-11*, Scholars Press, Atlanta: 1997, 49.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 48-49

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gunn and Fewell, 21

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 14.

inanimate things.”<sup>16</sup> Abel “paid homage by whatever grows on its own and in keeping with nature,” but Cain was “on the lookout for his own profit: he was the first person to think of plowing the earth”. His homage to God was “by things brought forth by force and the scheming of greedy man.”<sup>17</sup> Shepherds are involved in husbanding, tending and caring as opposed to the agriculturalist’s intrusion into the earth, manipulating and coercing. It is interesting to relate this to the motif of sex as ploughing (clearly a male point of view!) frequent when biblical writers are talking about impurity and abuse with a view to getting people in line again with Israel’s God. In all, Cain is a producer, while Abel is a “watchman of God’s creation.”<sup>18</sup>

But, Saul Levin suggests, it could simply be that God likes meat best.<sup>19</sup> Levin argues that the key to Old Testament sacrifice is surely the nose, as witnessed by Noah’s sacrifice hitting its mark in Genesis 8:21. Indeed, more widely speaking, God’s nose is the indicator of God’s anger in biblical Hebrew, with the expression usually translated ‘slow to anger’ meaning literally ‘long of nose’. One could also speculate that God is just as susceptible to the addictive appeal of high fat/high protein diets as contemporary first world humans are. If human beings are made in God’s image...

Whatever the particular focus, issues concerning the sacrifice, or the character and actions of the one who makes the sacrifice, make a subtle shift to matters of ethics. Questioning the sacrifice ends up questioning the human beings involved, the merit of their actions or the worth of their individual character. Mark Brett puts it precisely: “Attempts to demonstrate the inferiority of Cain’s gift ... assume that divine acceptance will always be the product of human performance.”<sup>20</sup> To those kinds of issue we also now shift.

### **Making Points of Ethics**

Cain’s reaction – a ‘great’ anger (that is, as Craig puts it, he is infuriated) – gets the story to its point, which for a number of interpreters is an ethical point. The sacrificial events are seen to operate as a mechanism for the narrator’s primary interest in “the development of the fate

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<sup>16</sup> Philo, in Gunn and Fewell, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Josephus, in Gunn and Fewell, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict and Continuity in Genesis*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville: 1991, 173.

<sup>19</sup> Saul Levin, “The More Savory Offering: a key to the problem of Gen 4:3-5”, *Critical Notes*, in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 98/1 (1979): 85.

<sup>20</sup> Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the politics of identity* Routledge, London and New York: 2000, 36.

and future of human beings.”<sup>21</sup> In this regard, a strong connection is made with previous texts, particularly Genesis 2-3 but also Genesis 1. What is life to be like for these creatures God has called into being? “With the knowledge of good and evil, human beings have the capacity for either,”<sup>22</sup> so the stress is now on choice and decision.<sup>23</sup> This is surely the character Yahweh’s primary concern, as revealed by the quantity and context of his dialogue with Cain. What matters, Yahweh’s words and actions reveal, is the relationship between Cain and his brother, Abel. Yahweh confronts Cain with this relationship and the fact that Cain demonstrates, first in his response of anger, then in his act of murder, that he “is not a brother and does not behave a brother”. Indeed Cain “is never called the brother of Abel”, a point that is in stark contrast to Abel who is “invariably called the brother of Cain.”<sup>24</sup> God’s questioning invites Cain to face up to his responsibility for his violent act but it “also conveys a sense of community.”<sup>25</sup> God offers a lesson in human life as lived in watchfulness with and for others.

The first ethical lessons are, however, back with the moment of choice, as Cain stands on the threshold given him by the knowledge of good and evil and as he feels the anger rise up inside himself in reaction to a rather troublesome happening in his working life. What has happened has put him in a rather poor light in comparison with another and has raised self-doubts regarding his working ability, that is, whether he can achieve results that are good for anything. He was trying to do what is beneficial, just as his brother Abel was. But he seems to have missed the mark.

Advice is therefore given: “God intimates that the way to obtain divine approval is in manifesting freedom of choice through inner struggle.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, sin is “on the lurk”, “stretched out” at the door of your house, the latter being an ominous variation of the translation of *rbts* given that Abel will soon stretched out dead on the ground.<sup>27</sup> Sin is like an animal lying in wait, perhaps not the wild animal that a number of commentators refer to<sup>28</sup> but, following van Seters, a domestic animal – a cat or a dog – “that lies in repose at the door

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<sup>21</sup> Mullen, E. Theodore, Jr, *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch* Scholars Press Atlanta: 1997, 109.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> cf. Gelande, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen van Wolde, “The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study” JSOT 52 (1991), 33.

<sup>25</sup> Craig, 121.

<sup>26</sup> Gelande, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Craig, 116.

<sup>28</sup> e.g. van Wolde, 35.

of one's dwelling."<sup>29</sup> It has considerable attraction for us, being good company and interesting in its distinctive quirks and endearing qualities. But it is domesticated from the wild (perhaps this story carries some ancient memories of the early days of domestication) and under a measure of control that calls for occasional re-assertion and even re-negotiation. You must find a way to make it your own, says Yahweh, make your own what is, in some respects, out there poised to surprise you and pounce, but in other respects is already taking a hold inside you, joining up with the strong feelings that have welled up in reaction to disturbing events. Rebecca Goldstein in the abridged version of a television panel on Genesis expresses it well:

There's an element of subjectivity in Cain. It's hard to know exactly what's going on inside him. He's made a spiritually expansive gesture, and then he's rejected. He's clearly just cast completely into himself. It's a maelstrom. And then God says something very interesting: "The choice is yours."... God is saying, "The blood is boiling in your veins. But if you get outside it, get over it, look at it, see it, you can master it."<sup>30</sup>

Sin is something within that is pushing to gain priority for one's own needs and feelings, indeed to take one's own hurts and concerns as the sole matter at hand, "without any other thoughts of the claims that other creatures make on your life."<sup>31</sup> For Goldstein God's advice is echoed in the philosophy of Spinoza and with that I would strongly agree. The advice is clear: don't be passive. Rather, be actively aware of what is going on in yourself so that, in Spinozistic fashion, you can emend it and move forward. Linking with Genesis 2-3 Goldstein observes that, having cast out Cain's parents "for fear that they're becoming too Godlike in having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge", here "God seems to be saying to their son, 'Be a little more Godlike!'"<sup>32</sup>

But Cain makes the wrong choice. His response to God's advice comes not in spoken reply, not to God anyway, but in action that is reactive and devoid of active awareness. He does not raise his face up; he rises up. He raises his whole body to attack, rather than lifting up his face to look at his brother and begin to understand something about relationships and feelings.<sup>33</sup> There is no emendation of Cain's view of reality, no Spinozistic movement in

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<sup>29</sup> John van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 1992, 138.

<sup>30</sup> Bill Moyers *Genesis: A Living Conversation* Doubleday, New York: 1996, 78.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 100.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Craig, 119.

knowledge towards understanding *sub quadam aeternitatis specie*, or “with reference to God.” Rather Cain reacts on the basis of his own instant view of what is good and what is evil, i.e. with reference to self and “under the category of duration” only.<sup>34</sup>

Then come the consequences, a crucial part of any ethical interpretation of this text, given the concern of ethics with the relation between deed and outcome. Typically the consequences are referred to as punishment, implying that the character called God (Yahweh) is making a specific and targeted response to Cain’s behaviour. By passing judgment on right and wrong and exacting retribution from the wrongdoer this response is to be a lesson in ethics for future reference. It is also to demonstrate that God is the linchpin in the given ethical system and the key player in this particular incident. A negative judgment is brought down on Cain and on his descendants whose whole existence is framed, so to speak, by violence, with the murder of Abel at the beginning of their genealogy and the violent boast of Lamek at the end.<sup>35</sup> Boundaries of right and wrong are clearly drawn and God is installed as their keeper and judge.

There is no let off for Cain before this judge. Lies do not work because the arable earth tells the tale. Cain may think he exists as an independent and separate individual, but that is the core of his problem in not being able to deal with his disappointment: he cannot see his essential connectedness with others, Abel and the land included. The connections hold beyond Cain, however, and another voice, the soil, speaks its part to the one who holds all connectedness together. Rhetoric does not work either for Cain. The question ‘am I my brother’s keeper?’ is sharp as well as petulant and Craig makes an excellent point in this regard. The word ‘keeper’ is a somewhat stronger term than perhaps God might have chosen, or required for God’s purposes here, and it enables Cain to use the classic ploy of overstating the case in order to deny all responsibility. A caring watchfulness, yes, but not a dependency-based custodial role. Maybe the extremes of the word ‘keeper’ continue to act as an escape route in relation to this story as it is read in contemporary contexts. We argue that killing is unavoidable in the context of war and that wars happen because we cannot be ‘keepers’ for all people, especially not those who threaten our own safety. We rationalise that harming others, economically and socially, is an unavoidable consequence of ‘keeping’ ourselves and our own and that we cannot look after everyone.

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<sup>34</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Unabridged Elwes Translation, Dover Publications, New York: 1955, Part II, Proposition XLIV, Corollary II; Part V, Proposition XXIII, Note.

<sup>35</sup> cf. Steinmetz, 173, discussing R.R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, Yale University Press, New Haven: 1977.

Cain is banished as punishment for murder: that is how the ethical outcome is often interpreted. It is how the book of Jubilees tells this story;<sup>36</sup> also Steinmetz observes: “A man who cannot live in peace with his brother has no choice but to leave the land”<sup>37</sup>; and Brett comments: “If he cannot ‘keep’ his brother, neither can he keep the land.”<sup>38</sup> This may be interpreted as the character Yahweh exacting punishment but also, or alternatively, it can be seen as the logical outcome of Cain’s destructive act: “shedding your brother’s blood, or that of your fellow human being, represents a ‘cutting off’ for both the murdered and the murderer.”<sup>39</sup> For Alan Boesak the consequences for Cain are a lesson for all oppressors, that they “shall have no place on God’s earth”, especially in the respect that it is a curse that “strikes at Cain’s very way of life, bound up with the land...”<sup>40</sup> Indeed it is a widely expressed view that the outcome of Cain’s deed is indicative of the way decisions for evil often come back on the person who makes them, undermining the foundation of their livelihood and value system. Furthermore, for Boesak, Cain lives on as a warning to others, with time for him to realise fault and seek forgiveness, although Boesak believes it is his younger brother Seth who offers the real hope of a new start for humanity.

Ethical lessons drawn from the text prior to this in the Bible – Genesis 2-3 – are predominantly about one’s individual relationship to God and to other individuals, with sometimes also an awareness of human beings’ relationship to the land. In contrast, and as a significant development, the lessons of Genesis 4 are social. As Walter Brueggemann puts it: “To live in God’s world on God’s terms is enough of a problem (Genesis 2-3)... But to live with God’s other creatures, specifically human creatures (the brother), is more of a dilemma.”<sup>41</sup> Some things put community at risk even before human beings start making choices and, as Westermann sees it, that is exactly what the narrator is highlighting in Genesis 4: “Inequality enters where there should be equality.”<sup>42</sup> The narrator seems to be ‘throwing up’ this example of inequality in order to point out the dangers and point towards the options. Learn from this, the narrator is saying: recognise the destructive and uncover the constructive; learn what is death-dealing and learn what is life-giving.

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible in History*, Jonathan Cape, London: 1999, 332-337.

<sup>37</sup> Steinmetz, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Brett, 38.

<sup>39</sup> van Wolde, *op.cit.*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Gunn and Fewell, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, John Knox Press, Atlanta: 1982, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Westermann, 297.

But what are we learning from a crime that leaves the victim without vindication and the criminal under a mark of protection? Jewish lawyer Alan Dershowitz raises this kind of question and expresses some reservations about God's initial 'Genesis' attempts at justice. It seems that *God* is learning en route: God is in a process of discovery of what is needed for right action and good behaviour, which in Dershowitz's view will eventually lead somewhere when the ten commandments are instituted. He asks, for example:

Why then is God so much more sympathetic to Cain – who knew the difference between right and wrong, who killed for a trivial reason, and who then tried to cover up his murder – than he was of Adam and Eve – who did not know right from wrong, who were tricked into committing a victimless crime, and who admitted their violation (though blamed it on others)?<sup>43</sup>

This seems to be pointing towards the area of theology, suggesting that theological, and not just ethical, issues are a focus for consideration in the text of Genesis 4.

### **Making Points of Theology**

Is deterrence from murder the crux of this story? Dershowitz argues that God is soft on Cain in not imposing "proportional punishment" and therefore there is no deterrent for potential killers. In fact the opposite of deterrence is suggested, namely, that with God you can get away with murder.<sup>44</sup> His argument however leads to issues that have more of a theological point than an ethical or judicial one. Dershowitz notes that some Jewish commentators suspect that God was feeling partly responsible for what had happened, given that God had not favoured Cain's sacrifice. This brings to mind for Dershowitz the judicial mitigating circumstance of 'provocation' but it also points, as I see it, in the direction of theology. Our story is bringing into open consideration some crucial reflections on God: who God is and how God relates to the world, including human beings. Brett also seems to point us in this direction with his comment regarding debates about Cain, his sacrifice and whether Cain failed in some way. The link between divine acceptance and human achievement, which Brett notices in the attempts of commentators to identify a reason for God's disregard, suggests that human beings are inclined to take an ethical, or generally functional, approach to matters of success and failure. But Brett then takes us beyond that by suggesting that biblical narratives do not always share this overriding concern for ways and means to do things right

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<sup>43</sup> Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice: Ten Stories of Biblical Injustice that Led to the Ten Commandments and Modern Law*, Warner Books, New York: 2000, 51.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 50.

with God. There are narratives in which the concern is rather more conflicted than that, with an uncertainty, or at least ambiguity, regarding God's requirements or preferences. From a theological perspective, this text has a strong interest in exploring this 'uncertain' God in addition to addressing the practicalities of living with such a God on the scene:

Attempts to demonstrate the inferiority of Cain's gift ... assume that divine acceptance will always be the product of human performance... While this is often the case in biblical narratives, it is not always so. The fundamental preference for the people of Israel, for example, is not based on human performance, and Genesis 4 seems to be concerned precisely with the tension between an ungrounded divine preference and the consequences for the rest of humanity who are not graced by God's favour.<sup>45</sup>

Who is this God in Genesis 4? One suggestion that is consistent with a theme of the divine nature that can be found throughout the book of Genesis is that this God is one who prefers the younger son.<sup>46</sup> Abel, Seth, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are all chosen by God, or given a clear sense of God's blessing, ahead of their older siblings. There seems also to be a concept in common used in relation to Cain and to Joseph's brother Reuben. It is the Hebrew word *s'et*, meaning dignity, honour or exaltation. As Brett notes this could be insignificant on its own, but given the definite Genesis theme of 'the younger son', we have some mandate to read a theological connection here. Abel, simply by being the younger son, "enjoys less honour", something his name *hebel* only intensifies. "Yahweh's exhortation to Cain in 4.7 suggests, however, that honour is to be found in doing what is right, not just in genealogical superiority."<sup>47</sup>

This does return the situation to the issue of ethics, but it is wider than that in terms of being a *metaethical* issue, inquiring into the principles behind goodness. The concern is with what gives the meaning and the validation to this particular system of right and wrong. The most widespread response of biblical narratives to questions of metaethics is theological: God is the point and purpose of human life, the principle of goodness. For example, plausible connections can be made between Genesis 4 and prophetic literature, concerning God's word to the people of Israel that tells them it is not so much who you are, but how you related to other people, that matters. Not status or wealth or age, but right relationships; and also that

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<sup>45</sup> Brett, *op.cit.*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> cf. Craig, 112; Frank Anthony Spina, "The 'Ground' for Cain's Rejection (Gen 4): *adamah* in the Context of Gen 1-11" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (1992) 320; Schwartz, *passim*; Brueggemann, *Commentary*, 55.

<sup>47</sup> Brett, 37.

specific prophetic theme: not sacrifice but justice.<sup>48</sup> This is a theological point with an ethical consequence.

For there is another slant on this text that also sees it making a theological point with an ethical consequence, albeit a different one. Genesis 4 can be interpreted as carrying the theological message of a God who hears the cry of pain and listens to the voices of struggle. This is the God who has a preferential option for the underdog. Abel is not even called his mother's son but only ever named as 'Cain's brother' and his name means perhaps futility but at least something as transient as a breath of air. Yet this is the one preferred by God when the two brothers line up with their sacrifices:

Abel's name strongly suggests that in the eyes of other people he does not amount to much. Is it more likely that Cain is envious not because Abel is more successful, but because Yahweh looks at a blunderer like Abel while ignoring Cain?<sup>49</sup>

This theme continues as God hears the cry that no one else will hear, namely, the cry of blood in the ground in the seeming void of an open field. Furthermore, God proves consistency in hearing Cain's cry of despair for *his* future<sup>50</sup> and gives Cain a mark that will give enough protection to enable his life to continue and indeed find a new path.

The cry and the lament are part of human existence, they are a defensive reaction to life threatened. Just as in v.10 the blood of the one murdered does not cry into the void, so too the defensive lament of the murderer is heard.<sup>51</sup>

This God, who hears each of these suffering voices, offers a promise for the future, a promise with universal possibilities. This God will continue to listen whenever the voice of Abel's blood "later echo[es] in voices of other victims of injustice."<sup>52</sup>

In particular, this God who places a mark of protection on Cain, in order to put a block on the cycle of vengeance, is a pacifist God. Thompson contrasts the Genesis narrative on Cain and Abel with that of Jubilees. The Genesis narrative is "unflinching", he says, in its answer to the theological question it raises: "Can one now abandon Cain the murderer and still hold to the divine command of freedom that the story set out with equal logic against an innocent Cain?" God cares about Cain: "Yahweh is mankind's keeper, he is our keeper, and he accepts

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<sup>48</sup> cf. van Seters, 138.

<sup>49</sup> van Wolde, 31.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Westermann, 309.

<sup>52</sup> Craig, 125.

his role as Cain's protector. The story is pacifist."<sup>53</sup> In the book of Jubilees the theological purpose is different. God in the Jubilees' narrative about Cain and Abel is a God of judgment. The one who is judged is therefore branded for life and his descendants cursed for their moral failure. It seems that interpretations of the Genesis story have been clouded by this later Jubilees' version of the ancient tale, with a theology of judgment often read back into the Genesis text.<sup>54</sup>

Another approach addresses directly the difficulty of drawing a consistent picture of God as given by the words and actions of this text. There is a thread of connection here with wisdom literature and the motif of a God who will not be boxed into any rational system.

How do we come to terms with the God who plays favorites? With the God whose own preference turns brother against brother, making them enemies? The God who is silent... in the moment of violence? The God who just doesn't give answers to these deep questions?<sup>55</sup>

This is God with no resting place.<sup>56</sup> As Spina points out, one way of regarding Cain and one construal for his reaction to God's disfavour regarding his sacrifice is as a problem centred in Cain's "inability to resign himself to Yahweh's inscrutable will."<sup>57</sup> Cain is just starting on the journey that Qohelet recounts in Ecclesiastes as his lifetime's work, the journey of discovering that all is *hebel*. Whether much can be made of this word in common between Genesis 4 and Ecclesiastes with regard to the narrator's own intentions – the name of Abel and the quality of what is transience, absurdity and irrationality; and also the name of Cain and Qohelet as "one who acquires or gathers or collects"<sup>58</sup> – it may resonate for readers of the biblical texts as a whole and offer a clue to understanding the God-character in the Genesis text. As James Crenshaw says, "[i]n Qohelet's minds it was impossible to tell whether God looked on humans with interest or with disdain."<sup>59</sup> The very assumption that there is or should be a rational system relating actions to their consequences is what Qohelet had found to be as futile as 'shepherding wind'. It is only when one gets to that point of recognition and

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<sup>53</sup> Thompson, 332.

<sup>54</sup> cf. Calvin, p.18 above.

<sup>55</sup> Moyers, 83.

<sup>56</sup> cf. Fox, 68; Phyllis Trible, lecture series, University of Otago, New Zealand, July 2002.

<sup>57</sup> Spina, 321.

<sup>58</sup> J.A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Translation and Commentary, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park: 1993, 76.

<sup>59</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 1998, 124.

“the belief in a grand causal order collapses”<sup>60</sup> that reality is faced and given the respect it warrants and needs, if we are to live in life-affirming interaction with it.<sup>61</sup> Anything else is knowledge for the purpose of human beings taking charge, specifically for the endeavour to control the future. More on this later as an issue in its own right within the Genesis text.<sup>62</sup>

But returning to some of the ways this God-beyond-rational-systems is expressed within the Genesis 4 text, we can notice another variation in the form of a God who is closely connected to, and concerned for, the arable earth. The *adamah*, claims Spina, is the reason Cain’s offering is rejected. For the soil is cursed as a result of Adam and Eve’s fault. This earth is God’s informant of Cain’s crime and it is the source of livelihood from which Cain is expelled. The integrity of the earth seems to be at stake here together with God’s purpose of sustaining and protecting, although there are questions about why God cursed it in the first place, given it was the only innocent party in Genesis 3. The human being *adam*, formed of this same topsoil is, in God’s conception of life, essentially linked to the soil for livelihood and for its place to belong. Indeed in the Genesis 2-3 framework the ground could not function, so to speak, without the human being to till it.<sup>63</sup> Cain’s expulsion is again a lesson for all humans to disregard at their peril: Cain is condemned to a “life of hopeless wandering and vulnerability to execution.”<sup>64</sup> He can never till the land again, and has to build a city in order to establish an alternative way of surviving.

Gunther Wittenberg takes this a step further identifying in this Genesis text the process of alienation from the Earth that is now dominating human existence and threatens the whole planet’s future. With toil and sweat livelihood from the soil was possible in ancient Palestine, but it needed constructive use of the knowledge of good and evil to determine what was truly beneficial. Antagonism with one’s brother, with its worst case scenario murder, is not beneficial. It disturbs the fundamental interconnectedness between living things and with the earth, as human beings break the connectedness and separate themselves off from others, God and earth included. Cain’s response to this continues the process of alienation. Unable to make a living from the soil, Cain does something to *emancipate* himself from it:

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<sup>60</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, Wm B. Eerdmanns, Grand Rapids: 1999, 49.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 49, 69-70.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Who’s in charge?’ see pp.33ff. below.

<sup>63</sup> Genesis 2:7, cf. Spina, 325.

<sup>64</sup> Spina, 328.

In a conscious choice Cain frees himself from the existence of a vagrant and a wanderer by building a city. He also frees himself from the burden of having to till the soil. City culture allows him to become independent of the drudgery of the life of a peasant.<sup>65</sup>

This has ramifications for relationships between city and the peasant culture that supplies the food, raising issues to be considered shortly.

Attitudes towards Cain's new option for human existence are themselves varied, and although theological implications abound which indict the inherent violence of city living and cast a pall of judgment over human creativity and the whole area of crafts and technology, it is important to treat them also as the valid sociological issues they are. In fact, a sociological perspective can enable movement beyond assertions of belief to ask questions that focus on what can be life-giving, as opposed to death-dealing, for human beings who must make choices for the future from whatever their situation makes available to them. But before turning to sociology there is one further theological point worth drawing from Cain's new start with city living. This new start and the development of skills and crafts among Cain's descendants is, theologically, simply that: a *new start*. In this text we meet a God who always has a new way forward or as Gelandner puts it: "the process of life is stronger than any of God's other acts."<sup>66</sup> This applies at the start of the chapter as life picks up for Adam and Eve outside the garden, and their knowledge is expressed in experiential form in the joy and challenge of procreation. It also applies at the end of the chapter when events prove that "the process of generating life is stronger than that of estrangement from God's harmony."<sup>67</sup> There is life of a kind for Cain and his descendants, and new life for a third child born to Eve and Adam, a replacement for Abel, as the text says, but perhaps a replacement for Cain who has also been lost to them. Maybe this is "the second draft", with more bad stuff following and requiring a "third draft".<sup>68</sup> Perhaps there is a message that the line of Seth is God's preference (again the younger son), Seth whose son has a name (*Enosh*) that is considered a doublet for *Adam* and is recognised as "a primal ancestor of all humankind".<sup>69</sup> But affirmations and judgments here are not absolute. The new start is shared around, with options to evaluate the outcomes of each genealogical strand with or without anti-city

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<sup>65</sup> Gunther Wittenberg,, "Alienation and 'Emancipation' from the Earth: The Earth Story in Genesis 4", in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield: 2000, 111-112.

<sup>66</sup> Gelandner, 45.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>68</sup> John Bart in Moyers, 73, 84.

<sup>69</sup> Westermann, 339.

prejudice, with or without the assumption that value is a competitive matter and only one line can come out the singular winner of God's favour.

There will be something new in human relationships with God also. However the link with God may have been understood before (for example, whatever was involved in the brothers' act of bringing sacrifice to God) human relating to God now has a clear means for expression: *At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD.* (4.26)

### **Making Sociological Points**

Taking a sociological approach to biblical narratives provides for the possibility of gaining insights into ancient times and is therefore an opportunity to understand something about the roles and attitudes of early peoples. Understanding of the beginnings and basics of civilisation is to be sought in the world of human beings, rather than with reference to transcendent principles or sources, and by seeking it there we can learn useful things about the life we live even this number of millennia later. As Westermann says, "It is to human beings that one must trace agriculture, the founding of cities, nomadic and sedentary life, the arts."<sup>70</sup> Theologically, biblical texts convey an overall sense of accepting life as God's gift. But God's gift of life is a human task and is therefore open to analysis and assessment. Indeed there is a responsibility to identify both the constructive and destructive implications of increasingly complex forms of civilisation, a process that involves diversification and fragmentation, as well as specialisation and dependency. That is, it is appropriate and important to consider sociological points of interest.

This Genesis text presents us with the basic sociological issue of difference among people, particularly in their mode of life and livelihood. It seems to have a specific concern with how to relate to creativity, that is, to craft and technology. Paula McNutt offers a fascinating perspective on the place of marginal types in human society, a perspective that is historically informative but also poses questions for contemporary societies to consider. What are our attitudes to people who perform various roles within society? What roles do we set apart, both in terms of looking up to them and looking down on them, trusting and distrusting, treating with awe and viewing with suspicion?

McNutt sees Cain as "the 'culture hero' and eponymous ancestor of tent dwellers, musicians, and metalworkers." Cain and his descendants are forerunners in the diversification of human

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, 343.

society, “introducing to humankind some of the primary elements of civilization.”<sup>71</sup> But this initiative and innovation receives a mixed reception. By researching comparable stories from traditional African and Middle Eastern societies McNutt identifies a “social marginality” among Cain and his descendants that was particularly directed to smiths and artisans. The methods and creative abilities of these people were beyond the ken of nomads and settled agriculturalists and seemed like magic to them. Yet their skills and products were “economic and cultural necessities”<sup>72</sup> within a society that continued to function according to established patterns of generations of pastoralists and gardeners. The mark of Cain therefore reflects the sociological reality of the ‘stigma’ of people who were “basically ‘sacred’ in the true, *ambivalent sense of the word.*”<sup>73</sup> McNutt notes that in more urban traditional Middle Eastern societies the marginalisation has not been as great, with apparently less apprehension about the skills and achievements of metal-workers and craftspeople.

Others have noticed an anti-civilisation tilt within the text. Wittenberg, for example, comments on a strong bias against city life that is detectable in what he refers to as the ‘Yahwistic’ *primaeva* history.<sup>74</sup> Van Seters considers it was likely a “universal fact” for the narrator that “Abel, the shepherd, has the clear advantage.”<sup>75</sup> I referred early to assumptions about the inferiority of the agricultural line of business and sociologically this text is indicative of some level of tension, if not conflict, between the two ways of life, agricultural and pastoral.<sup>76</sup> Jack Miles in *God: A Biography* considers the early chapters of Genesis to be anti-agriculture.<sup>77</sup> What we seem to be presented with is basic elements of an ancient society representing early stages in the process of civilisation that are both positive and negative. These basic elements are positive in relation to a sensible and potentially constructive division of labour and negative in relation to the rivalry that ensues and the conflict that rivalry produces.<sup>78</sup> The link between civilisation and violence, raised before in theological terms, is therefore also a sociological issue, which can be phrased as a question: is there an essential connection between civilisation and violence? Must violence be recognised as a fact of life and somehow lived with as a unavoidable feature of human social structures? This text has an obvious interest in this scenario, with the “spread of violence ... related via the genealogy to

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<sup>71</sup> Paula M. McNutt, “In the Shadow of Cain”, *Semeia* 87 (1999), 45.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, 50, italics in the original.

<sup>74</sup> Wittenberg, 111.

<sup>75</sup> van Seters, 137.

<sup>76</sup> cf. Speiser in Gunn and Fewell, 21 and Spina, 319.

<sup>77</sup> Miles, Jack, *God: A Biography*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1995, 39.

<sup>78</sup> cf. Westermann as considered by Gunn and Fewell, 23.

the spread of culture.”<sup>79</sup> An impression is formed that there is an inbuilt tension in human existence that needs some kind of social system or mechanism to alleviate it and contain its more violent tendencies. According to many readings of this text, that mechanism is the worship of Yahweh indicated in the last verse of Genesis 4.

I think it is important also to include under this sociological heading themes in the text that relate to family life. As with the above considerations of social structures, it is helpful to view the issues of family relationships brought to mind by Genesis 4 as basic concerns of *human* living and therefore open to the scrutiny on those terms. Family relationships are indeed a gift of God and therefore open to theological interpretation. But, as with civilisation and culture, family relationships are also a task for human beings to undertake. That is, humans have some responsibility to be wise about their relationships as family and to work at mitigating the more harmful aspects, if not removing them altogether. Sociological analysis can assist with developing wisdom and pursuing these efforts. What we encounter in the Cain and Abel narrative are sibling jealousies and favouritism. Whether the favouritism is actual, or simply experienced as such because the reasons are not understood something happens that drives a wedge between the brothers. Parental attitudes towards the first child or the young child, or whichever child, can be instinctive and difficult to modify. Likewise assumptions about the significance of one’s place as a child within the family can also be ingrained and emotionally decisive. Jealousy and the catch cry ‘that’s not fair!’ are deeper in our experience and memories than we sometimes care to acknowledge.

Family tensions can be approached in much the same way as social interaction on the wider scene. They reveal the fundamental dialectic that drives human interaction and contains the roots of its conflictual tendencies. It is the dialectic of ‘same’ and ‘different’, with each human individual being of the same basic stuff and format, but each variation different from all others. Family and social interaction are the practical working out of the consequences of what in biblical terms is called ‘creation’, that is, the process of differentiation from the raw and original possibilities of life into diverse and multiple forms and expressions. How does the ‘different’, that has grown out of the same, relate to other different ones? How is ‘sameness’ to be acknowledged without absorbing it as ‘identical’ with oneself? How is ‘difference’ recognised without identifying it as ‘alien’ to oneself? These are the very questions raised by Genesis 4 when we interpret it in terms of human social existence.

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<sup>79</sup> E. Theodore Mullen, Jr, *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch* Scholars Press Atlanta: 1997, 111.

## Making Political Points

When social analysis opts for arguing the pros and cons of forms of human society and interaction, and starts promoting a particular way as the best way, we move into the area of politics and political analysis. Political views are certainly present in the biblical text and political assumptions hover beneath the surface. Wenham makes the interesting observation that in the ancient Middle East there was a general sense of optimism about human ‘progress’. Mesopotamian texts reveal a conviction that civilisation is a good thing for the world. But this, Wenham says, is in contrast to the biblical texts which give an overall impression that their accounts of human life function to unveil “the inexorable advance of sin.”<sup>80</sup> Political analysis of Genesis 4, and any political insights we might find in it, relate to the assessment of this issue: is there progress at this point or is sin marching on? Are human beings on or off track at this point in their history? And ‘this point in their history’ could be the time the narrative purports to describe, or the time when the text was gathered into written form, or indeed any time in the history of this “pilgrim” narrative.<sup>81</sup> Are we on or off track at our point in history?

Two contemporary commentators find direct political messages in this text. Gale Yee’s discussion<sup>82</sup> works with Genesis 2-3, but her views are relevant to Genesis 4 in so far as the latter can be treated as a continuation from the former. She finds in Genesis 2-3 ideas that reflect a change from an earlier familial- and kinship-based Mode of Production to the tributary- and monarchy-based mode that insinuated itself into Israelite life and became entrenched during the reign of Solomon. She considers this text to be a reflection of that time and a product of its values. It presents human origins in a written form that has the purpose of shoring up the establishment. Yee identifies this particularly with regard to the primacy of the marriage relationship over traditional familial relationships. Traditional familial relationships drew multiple generations of siblings together as kin and put loyalty to this extended family ahead of all other loyalties. Breaking this traditional extended kinship enabled greater state control of people’s activities by opening up the alternative of primary loyalty to monarch and state. The story of Cain and Abel fits Yee’s analysis in so far as it highlights dangers in sibling relationships and, by presenting these dangers as if they were inherent or unavoidable, promotes a policy of caution and even distrust among kin.

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<sup>80</sup> Wenham, 98.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Phyllis Trible: “The Bible is a pilgrim wandering through history to merge past and present.” *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia: 1978, 1.

<sup>82</sup> Yee, Gale A., “Gender, Class, and the Social Scientific Study of Genesis 2-3”, *Semeia* 87 (1999): 177-192.

Itumeleng Mosala takes a very similar line addressing specifically the Genesis 4 text, considering it to be a royalist work composed during Solomon's reign:

...the narrative's dominant ideological concerns are those of the state, which needs to justify the creation of large privately owned estates together with the dispossession of peasant farmers from their inherited plots. The story legitimizes this process of dispossession by a new class of estate holders under the protection of the monarchy.<sup>83</sup>

Abel may be the loser in the story, but the point is to generate sympathy for him as the victim. The goal is to shift political sympathies away from the Cains of the time – those continuing to work the land in small, family-based agricultural units – towards the Abels – the owners of extensive pastoral territory, often resident in urban centres and functioning as absentee landlords. Mosala takes issues with “how the monarchy exacted tribute from village peasants”<sup>84</sup> and Cain's sacrifice carries a message also in relation to this. It seems that what the agriculturalist brings is not what the dominant ideology values. Contemporary farmers in Aotearoa New Zealand know what it feels like to hear pronouncements that indicate that what you are producing is no longer of value in the eyes of the ruling worldview. Listening to politicians promoting the ‘knowledge economy’ as the way of the future, they are told that an emphasis on primary production is outmoded and is in fact holding us back economically in the global arena. The politics of the story of Cain and Abel, as Mosala reads it, holds that only Abel's work, only his lifestyle and means of livelihood, are the way of their future. Cain's life is outmoded, his production methods inefficient and the insistence of his kind to continue as they are is a block to national and economic development.

But the question in the minds of contemporary farmers in Aotearoa New Zealand is this: how are people to live without primary products, i.e. food? The Cains of Solomon's world may have asked: how can everyone be fed without cereal and vegetable crops? Can meat alone feed all, with none going short? Which leads us to a matter flagged earlier, namely, how city dwellers get what they need to live. Wittenberg identifies the source of food for the cities developed by the descendants of Cain. The source is the labour of those who continue to work the land with the toil and sweat that post-Eden existence requires. It is the peasants, the ones, like Cain, who struggle to get good results from the soil they cannot exist without who provide the food. And Wittenberg maintains that cities can only get what they need by appropriating it “by violence.” That is, cities exist “by extortion, exploitation and

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<sup>83</sup> Gunn and Fewell, 26.

<sup>84</sup> Mosala in Gunn and Fewell, 27.

oppression of the peasant populations producing the food.”<sup>85</sup> Wittenberg’s analysis points to a politics of the powerful, permeated with violence and reflecting a life of such alienation that it is “ripe for the Flood.”<sup>86</sup>

Where is it all heading? First, second, third drafts? Is the story of Cain and Abel in fact just one small part of a much larger narrative of human life, with its meaning to be found there in the frame of the bigger picture? The question would be: is there any point or purpose at all to what happens to Cain and Abel? What *is* God doing? This is the major question to which we now turn.

### **Who’s In Charge?**

Gelander considers that “the main problem we encounter at the conclusion of the Eden story concerns the extent to which God will prefer freedom of will to obedience, and to what extent man [sic] in his turn will disrupt God’s harmony.”<sup>87</sup> The first half of the quotation seems to me to present a major issue that has been hovering beneath the surface. It has occasionally risen to the surface as an issue in its own right but, in the spirit of the second half of this quotation, usually submerges again as a non-issue simply because God’s bottom line is not up for question. It is the issue of power: who is in control of the events of this narrative? Who is in charge of this world we live in?

Is God really in the business of giving? Or is something else on God’s mind, perhaps even the intent to repossess the gift? There seems to be some ambivalence if not dispute about who owns life and the ability to create new possibilities for life. Is God in the process of entrusting responsibility to human beings and enabling, through their choices, creativity to be their own, or is God keen to stay in charge and therefore acting to reclaim authority as circumstances require? For Ilana Pardes there is a clear move by the deity to reclaim the power to give life and reassert the prerogative to be named as life-giver. At the beginning of the chapter, we see Adam and Eve discovering the possibilities of life outside the garden, including procreation. Eve gives birth and gives voice to what Craig simply describes as “a mother’s radiant love”,<sup>88</sup> but Pardes recognises as something much more significant, particularly in the way it “hovers

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<sup>85</sup> Wittenberg, 112.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>87</sup> Gelander, 46.

<sup>88</sup> Craig, 109.

between interior speech and vocalised ceremonial discourse.”<sup>89</sup> Pardes identifies hubris in Eve’s speech. If it had been spoken by a female deity, it would be a simple description of the facts of the matter, but it is “a bold provocation in a monotheistic context” from Eve’s mouth. As a human mother she is “as far from modesty as one can get.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Eve is reclaiming the role of naming that Adam pre-empted in the chapters 2 and 3 (for more often than not it is the mother’s job), with a clear challenge to male humans, as well as to the deity, regarding the patriarchy of the developing system. But by the end of the chapter Eve’s voice speaks differently: “Is Eve more modest and careful at this point due to her first encounter with death?”<sup>91</sup> She is certainly more subdued claiming no place this time alongside God in the act of creating Seth’s life, as she had done at Cain’s birth. As Miles interprets it in his biography, just as Yahweh is not sure about giving away the power to control life, neither will Yahweh easily relinquish the power to control death.<sup>92</sup> By the time of the birth of Seth God appears to have taken back the right to control life-giving, just as in the mark of protection for Cain God takes back the right to control death-dealing. This is a sole charge creator, as opposed to the partner in creation that Eve had first celebrated.

Creativity is certainly at stake, a point made by commentators who look closely at the meaning of names, Cain’s and Seth’s in particular. Steinmetz reads creativity directly from the name *cayin*, alongside the verb *caniti* used by Eve. It regularly means ‘I have acquired’ or ‘I have gained’ but it also has a marginal use as meaning ‘I have created.’ She sees it as characterising Cain’s occupation “as well as the accomplishments of his descendants.”<sup>93</sup> With a somewhat creative reading of the names in the genealogy, she also traces this creativity through Cain’s descendants, finding also a rejuvenated expression of Abel’s name in variations of *hevel*, as *Yaval*, *Yuval* and *Tuval-Cain*, which point to “fruitfulness” and “productivity” rather than “futility”. But the argument maintains that it is the creativity in Cain that is his downfall, or rather his presumptions about his own ability as a “producer” and not just a “watchman of God’s creation.”<sup>94</sup> Seth therefore comes on the scene as a contrast

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<sup>89</sup> Ilana Pardes, “Beyond Genesis 3: The Politics of Maternal Naming” in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, edited by Athalya Brenner, Sheffield Academic Press 1993, 177.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, 180.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, 186.

<sup>92</sup> Miles, 47.

<sup>93</sup> Steinmetz, 172.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 173.

with his name suggesting “an acknowledgement of the limitedness of human creativity vis-à-vis God.”<sup>95</sup>

God gives freedom for the sake of responsibility. There appears to be agreement on this matter among the commentators and in the text itself in its relationship with Genesis 2-3. The text of Genesis 4 is clear in this respect, particularly in the dialogue involving the voice of God. The knowledge of good and evil is now a ‘given’ of human life. Humans live with choices for good or ill and the advice from God is to choose responsibly. Freedom, however, can be claimed as something significantly different from this, namely autonomy. The knowledge of freedom as autonomy is not so much a process to discern benefit from harm, but a means to control the world around with a view to having some control over the future. As Wittenberg suggests, autonomy is Cain and his kind’s response to their difficulties in managing to survive in interaction with other people and with non-human nature, particularly the soil.<sup>96</sup> Freedom as autonomy is the attempt to emancipate oneself from one’s troubles by developing an existence that is not an interconnected system involving others, human and non-human, but an independent construction entirely in accordance with one’s own plans and needs. Creativity, it seems to me, sits uneasily between these two – responsibility and autonomy. Ideally it is a function of responsibility, and it comes packaged with that promise to be life-giving for self and others and to enhance the world’s energy and opportunities. But functionally human beings seem to be more creative, or motivated towards creativity when they are driven by an urge to stand apart in some way. For example, the threatening antagonism of likely opponents or an encroaching paternalism from authority figures can stir up a passion for independence and self-determination with constructive and creative effects.

Indeed this question ‘who’s in charge’ is in dispute in the biblical text itself so that it is surely a credible focus for interpretation of the narrative and for seeking insight from it. ‘Who’s in charge?’ is part of the dispute of the narrative as a major point at issue for the protagonists. And it is in dispute in the multiple and sometimes conflicting threads that this narrative, and its wider context within the Bible, reveal on closer inspection. For example, within the story it seems that God is trying to get these new human beings to exercise their knowledge of good and evil. The God that carries through from chapter 3 wants them to take responsibility, to use their creativity constructively and indeed, as a character continuing through from chapter 1, wants them to *be* the image of God. An interest in this likeness to God can be detected in

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, 172.

<sup>96</sup> Wittenberg, 111.

the God/Cain discussion about ‘dignity’ (*s’et*), and God’s advice on how to find dignity, honour and exaltation. Brett notes that various options for “likeness to God” have been under consideration in the text. He argues that likeness to God in the form of rule by human beings over the rest of creation has been deconstructed in the narrative events and dialogue of Genesis 2-3. Perhaps, he says, immortality could have been a possibility, but it was ruled out when the barrier was installed at the end of Genesis 3 to prevent access to the Tree of Life. Only one possibility remains, says Brett: “the human can really be like God only by acting rightly, by ruling over sin (cf. 4.7).”<sup>97</sup> Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is an early recognition of this as a primary issue, namely, “how Cain will handle his frustration, the temptation to evil, over which he does have power.”<sup>98</sup> It seems that God is very involved here, testing human ability to its limits.<sup>99</sup>

That is God’s goal, it would seem, but there are other inclinations. Gelandner points out that the response Cain makes to God’s advice “implies that his inclination is to place the burden of responsibility upon the shoulders of authority; and in this, he shows himself as unconsciously prepared to surrender his independence.”<sup>100</sup> God gives responsibility, but Cain balks at the hard task it entails and shifts the onus back to God, as the one in authority who therefore continues to be in charge of – and therefore responsible for – proceedings.<sup>101</sup> Faye Kellerman understands Cain’s question ‘am I my brother’s keeper?’ to reflect just this issue of responsibility: Cain is saying to God “You create this whole world. You created my parents. You created us. Who’s the real keeper around here?”<sup>102</sup> But God is surely concerned about what is happening for Cain, not just after Cain causes havoc of the extreme kind - his act of murder - but from the very beginning of the interaction between Cain and God. Although God does not look on Cain’s sacrifice God does regard his reaction (external) and his feelings (internal),<sup>103</sup> that is, God’s questions to Cain reveal concern for his well-being. God wants Cain to learn: like a teacher God is trying to find the best way to educate this particular student. Brueggemann puts it in these terms: “By his seemingly capricious rejection of Cain, Yahweh has created a crisis. He poses the crisis to Cain and insists that Cain resolve it.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Brett, 42.

<sup>98</sup> In Gunn and Fewell, 15.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Gunn and Fewell, 16.

<sup>100</sup> Gelandner, 53.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Gelandner, 64.

<sup>102</sup> Moyers, 100.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Craig, 114.

<sup>104</sup> Brueggemann, 57.

It is time for human beings to face reality outside Eden. Wittenberg, among others, has seen this as the transparent message of the text.<sup>105</sup> The arable earth produces only with hard toil and there will always be uneven results. Human beings cannot escape life with the soil – there is no other life and livelihood for *adamah*, the creature of the soil - but neither can they cruise along sure that every year will be a boom year. Other options to land-based existence become appealing and *seem* to work fairly well. However, they lead down dangerous routes, given that they entail an existence that requires snatching from others what one needs, and securing oneself against the threat of others retaliating. Also, as the tone of the narrative post-Flood suggests (e.g. Genesis 9:1-4), life with non-human species will be risky as well, with animals in particular existing alongside humans in an ambivalent relation of use and mutual fear. Violence starts to become a feature of life and threatens to take charge, unless the reality of life *with* the earth is faced up to.

Uneven results suggest that equality is a concept of thought always asymptotic to the practicalities of human living. If we keep pursuing the reason for inequality in this narrative, we miss the point of dealing with it well or badly. Siblings and other family relationships are a universal reminder of how basic and ordinary inequality is, and that it is in some measure unavoidable. You cannot mitigate entirely for the chronological position of a child in a family, or for the fact that they live the first portion of their life as a child, dependent upon, and therefore unequal to, adults. ‘Face it, deal with it or else live in isolation’ seems to be the message. Perhaps God set it up this way, tricking human beings in the garden to eat the fruit so that they would have what they needed to get going in the world – knowledge of good and evil – because the world needed their participation in order to flourish. Furthermore, the punishment motif could have entered as a mechanism to get them out into that world of challenge, rather than stay with the tempting life of ease in the Garden, but a life also with the potential malaise contemporary culture calls ‘boredom’. The best response to any crisis, like the crisis put in front of Cain, is to employ the knowledge humans have of good and evil. The advice for constructive human living is to utilise the power, exercise the creativity and claim the independence granted by the one who set the world in motion, and to do this in cahoots with the powers and purposes that are all around one, and not in presumed opposition and antagonism to them. The image is of synergy. The policy is that of interacting rather than attacking, offering the prospect that violence is not therefore an essential of human existence.

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<sup>105</sup> Wittenberg, 108.

## Chapter 4: The God Character

Multiplicity is surely the theme of this investigation. In the previous section I have rehearsed the multiplicity of interpretations of Genesis 4 under the variety of headings that can provide a plausible schema for the diverse perspectives taken and conclusions reached by interpreters. Legitimacy has therefore become a wide-open issue, given that any claim by an interpreter that their interpretation is the right way to go with the text will require argument that other interpretations are wrong, with no obvious grounds for adjudicating between differing assertions of such an exclusive claim to be right. The motif of sibling rivalry comes to mind, together with the warning: “sin is lurking at the door”.

It is notable that all aspects of the text of Genesis 4 - the drama of Cain and Abel and the birth statements and the genealogies of Cain and Seth - are infused with these diverse possibilities, stemming from the variety of contexts in which the text is and has been read. But diverse possibilities are also already incipient within the text itself, in ambiguities of language and inter-textual associations with texts nearby and scattered through the Bible. And it is becoming very difficult to avoid the awareness that God is one of these ambiguities. In the drama of Cain and Abel as the text presents it even prior to any interpretations, theological or otherwise, God is a central character. As in any drama, characters come across as both transparent and cryptic in their actions and personality. God’s nature and purpose is also in the genealogical part of the chapter a mixture of the obvious and the obscure. As Miles puts it, this God with no past before becoming creator of the world “at the outset could only be a kind of living question mark”,<sup>106</sup> a character that not only the reader is unsure about, but the human characters in the text (and perhaps even the narrator) struggle to get to know him and work out what he is up to. But despite these questions and difficulties God’s obviously central role in Genesis 4 has received relatively little scrutiny. There seems to be an overriding assumption that God is a ‘given’ and that, in the words of Gunn and Fewell, “what God does is ... unchallengeable... None of the commentators is willing to explore the *character of God* too far.”<sup>107</sup> Certainly there are questions about God – why reject Cain’s sacrifice, why give the advice given, why give Cain protection etc. – but they are questions about what is right. The presupposition is that what God does will be right (and just and for the best), the only dilemma for human commentators being the standard dilemma of human

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<sup>106</sup> Miles, 87.

<sup>107</sup> Gunn and Fewell, 28 italics in original.

living on these terms, namely, *what* is the right thing that God is doing here so that we can concur with it and align ourselves to it? The further presupposition behind this is that God's character is sure and certain, i.e. constant, reliable, unproblematic, singular and unquestionably good – in the eyes of the reader.

But it is no simple matter to explore the character of God. It entails taking on board ambiguity with all its connotations and implications and assigning them to God, which means accepting as part of one's *modus operandi* a God with slippage. If God is a real part of one's life this is no mere quandary of theoretical speculation but a predicament of practical existence. There is a strong case for ambiguity as a category of theology in relation to the world of human experience (and beyond human experience to the extent that we can speak sensibly at all about non-human existence). Although "the endeavour to entertain Ambiguity is vertiginous", with "one ambiguous instance [having] to be explained by something else which is itself ambiguous, unfinished, open to interpretation",<sup>108</sup> its lack of finality is true to the contingency of the world we experience. Ambiguity has considerable explanatory power in relation to the world as human experience it. It helps provide a realistic account of the way things are - the more regular together with the more perplexing, the patterns and the ruptures - and it offers a applicable framework for assessing what could be viable contributions towards the future. But I think there is a strong propensity to cling to God as *unambiguous* alongside this ambiguity, as the one constant to help cope with inconstancy, as the anchor so to speak in the storm. For myself, I have been critical of claims of certainty about the substance of God, about God's words and deeds in relation to the world and about specific doctrines for understanding God/human interaction, but I seem to have still assumed a sense of God who just is, and who is OK. The preconception has stood that God is totally good and is wholly right and just, in a way that precludes any risk of being otherwise. For a God who were otherwise could be impossible for me to live with, and that would apply whether God is envisaged to be a distinct, personal being or conceived in terms of mystery or awareness or spirit 'as free as the wind'. I sense a requirement that whoever our God is specifically, God is good in a fundamental way that somehow all sensible people could agree upon.

It is therefore time to take courage and face the facts of life outside Eden, i.e. face up to the reality of the text before us. The biblical God is "an ambiguous one, always in the process of

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<sup>108</sup> Ruth Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, SCM Press, London: 1985, 35.

deciding” what kind of God to be – “whether to be ‘like other gods’, or to be a holy God.”<sup>109</sup> In the Genesis television conversation Burton Visotzky recognised the difficulties of grappling with the character of God in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the book of Genesis: “...only to have a good guy isn’t going to be helpful. It’s not true to reality. To only have this whimsical, arbitrary God isn’t going to help us either. We must have a very, very complicated picture of God. If God is the Creator of the universe, then at least give God credit for being complicated.”<sup>110</sup> For, as I said earlier, the endeavour is to give God a proper hearing and that means *not* importing the preconceptions of a monitoring system of ‘good Godness’ and not bringing along our God from “somewhere else”.<sup>111</sup> The task is to consider the *Bible’s* God by looking “in, with, and under the text itself”, without applying any filters to what we see there. And it is not the case that we can confine ourselves somehow to the God of the original text. It is apposite to note again how little the text says in its own right, e.g. about the respective value of agriculturalists and shepherds, but we can also observe how every meaning encountered in the text relates to interests and issues of those seeking meaning in it. Beginning with its first tellers in oral tradition, to the literate ones who wrote it down, the editors who collected it alongside others, those who formed the scroll of Genesis, and on through the history of this text’s journey, meaning has been discovered. But it has always been discovered in *conversation* between reader and text, with *both* conversation partners contributing to discovered content. In the drama of Cain and Abel the conversation of text and reader is a conversation between drama and drama-watcher, with God the leading actor. The nature or character of God is what and who we encounter in this conversation of drama-watching, an encounter which is at its best when we are being the best kind of audience, viz. one that puts body and heart and soul into engaging with what unfolds before it. The real God is not an independent entity, detached and disengaged from text and reader.

The following is a sketch of what this text as drama conveys about God from a variety of engaged audience perspectives. It could be considered a kind of map of God’s character, the territory covered by a God with such chameleon-like alacrity that God appears to have no resting place, with the thought that the map needs to stay out ready for the next move.

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<sup>109</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology II: Embrace of Pain” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 47, 1985, 415.

<sup>110</sup> Moyers, 97.

<sup>111</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 19.

## God at the Edge

In some respects God in Genesis 4 is a character who is at the edge. God sits at the edge of human existence and human comprehension in three distinguishable forms.

**God the Judge** hands out blessings and curses, weal and woe. That is, this is the character who favours one person but not the other. He\* needs or wants propitiation, or perhaps both. The agriculturalist and the pastoralist seem to know this so they follow their instincts and as a natural part of their life and work bring sacrifice to God the Judge. The important thing is how the Judge will react, either looking on them and their work, or not looking.

**God the Trickster** is a character who could be hovering around from the previous chapter in Genesis and shows some signs of presence in Genesis 4. This is the character who sets things up for Adam and Eve – the tree, the prohibition, the consequences that followed - in order to provoke transformation in them and their approach to life. In Genesis 4 God reveals some trickery in the method used to get Cain to recognise his responsibility as a human being in relationship with other humans. He takes Cain to the extremes of what he is capable of and then, using the soil and its inability to produce for Cain's bloodied hands, underscores his argument about humans as 'keepers'. Cain may have in fact got the point and taken up his responsibility by building city life, a place where people relate constantly to other people and develop a style of living with 'keeper' roles an essential part of it. If an acceptable alternative translation for verse 13 is adopted - *my iniquity is too great to bear* – this reading of God's character gains further credibility. Is God the trickster at work in another, more manipulative way also? The result of the interaction between God and the two humans is a violence that scars human relationships from this point on. Has God tricked them into believing that, because rivalry with other human beings is endemic, God alone can be trusted and human beings must therefore turn to God for protection?

These two characters of God are very human in their content, in so far as they are a means of articulating 'edge' experience when articulation is not easy or maybe even impossible, given that it is the edge of understanding that is under examination. The third character 'at the edge' may seem very different (and perhaps feel more acceptable) because it does not have

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\* I retain a personal pronoun here to convey the sense of 'character in a drama' that is crucial to this discussion. It seems to me inappropriate not to speak in personal terms in this respect. In a different context, but I think similar vein, when working with sheep it would seem odd to me to refer to them as it, or to avoid using a pronoun and thereby insert a sense of distance, especially given the often problematic characters that they are in interaction with humans. Likewise with regard to God in the context of this discussion.

the same concrete human characteristics. However it still uses human categories of thought and it is important to retain awareness of that. What this way of mapping of God-as-character reveals is that God-talk is always in human form. It is always ‘incarnated’ in some way or other.

**God the Inscrutable One** may have reasons for what he is doing, and thinking, but they are unknowable. God’s responses are unpredictable, leaving the question dangling – what is Cain supposed to do to get his sacrifice right? But knowledge is power so perhaps withholding knowledge is what the Inscrutable One uses to stay in charge. The sibling rivalry that begins with Cain and Abel continues throughout Genesis and beyond sees sons at odds with one another and fathers thereby able to retain their position of authority. An inscrutable God cannot avoid suspicion about motives and purpose: perhaps “Cain and Abel are pitted against each other instead of against their father” as Schwartz suggests.<sup>112</sup>

### **God in the Midst**

But God appears to us in Genesis 4 with another face: indeed the lead actor God is presented as clearly having a face and being present alongside the other characters. That is, there is territory on the God-as-character map in which God takes a place in the thick of human events and experiences. First there is the **God We See Face to Face**. ‘Let’s bring our life to God. Let’s show God the work we have done.’ Both Cain and Abel have an instinct for connecting with God, for doing something so that they can be in God’s presence and perhaps even be face to face with God. God indeed proves to be present to one of them, Abel, as he “looks upon” (v.4) Abel’s sacrifice.

But this God can be **There But Not Looking**. The offering of the other is not favoured – “but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (v.5). It is as if God turns his back on Cain, or alternatively God’s back is all Cain can see. And for Cain, God’s absence is not confined to a back that is turned but develops into a wider reality: Cain discovers places that are beyond God’s presence. Cain’s alienation from the soil means he is alienated from God and must live “wavering and wandering”.<sup>113</sup>

Encountered also close at hand is an **In Your Face God**. Cain gets to know this character very well, first as God in his face advising him, asking questions about Cain’s state of heart and mind, but so full-on that there is no waiting for an answer before heading straight into the

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<sup>112</sup> Schwartz, 109.

<sup>113</sup> Dershowitz, 49.

advice – “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accept? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (v.7). Later this God is in his face accusing Cain – “Where is your brother Abel?” (v.9) “What have your done?” (v.10). Finally God marks Cain with a stigma that will protect him from other human beings, but again it is in his face, ensuring he and others are constantly aware of the reality and impact of this God. Even in the absence of God that constitutes the alienation of Cain’s banishment, this God remains *in his face*.

Another recognisable type of God in the midst of human living is the sense in this text that God stands for, and expresses, **The Way Life Is**. Bad stuff happens: it is just the way it is. This aspect of God presents itself as an important message for Cain and for readers of the story. Cain’s experience of rejection raised issues that could rightly be addressed to God. Most if not all readers will bring to their encounter with the text similar issues, with major questions that are given the theological title of ‘theodicy’. God comes to the fore on these terms when people ask: why do bad things happen and where does God stand on the matter? And the answer comes as a sense that ‘The Way Life Is’ and God in some way characterises this understanding of life. The Genesis 4 drama of sacrifice and response are simply a means to an end, a plot mechanism to get to the point of living with life the way it is. The task is to deal with the emotions that arise from bad experiences and focusing effort on right relationships with others, God and earth included.

### **God Engaging with Intent**

God is known in this drama also in ways that are primarily a matter of interaction. This interaction of divine with human takes four forms within the text of Genesis 4.

**God the Teacher** has some lessons to share with his new human beings. The curriculum is independence and the responsible use of the knowledge of good and evil. God addresses Cain like a teacher intent upon Cain learning to take responsibility for his relationship with his brother and to cope with the consequences of his actions. God the Teacher lets go of control in order to put choice in human hands (Cain’s), but in doing so he also risks the result (the murder of Abel). The teaching goal takes centre stage for this character, but with the end again seeming to justify the means, even when that makes use of innocence (Abel). This accusation could also be put in front of other God-characters, e.g. the Judge or the Trickster, but it stands out here because the Teacher engages intently with the human characters and has a strong interest in their learning outcomes. With the Judge or the Trickster human beings

remain uncertain of God's intentions. God is at the edge and sometimes out of reach. The Teacher however is up close and interacting, and cannot be detached from proceedings. The Teacher is implicated in the lesson, for indeed teaching is a two-way process.

That is, not far from the character of the teacher we find **God the Learner**. This is the God who repents of what he has made or done, who changes tack when he sees the results so far. This is God learning on the job and unlikely to claim the title 'omniscient'. It may be an interesting question whether God knew the answer to the question he put to Cain "Where is your brother, Abel?" (v.9), but here on the terms of the drama involving Cain, Abel, God and the ground Cain works, God's knowledge about Abel is gained through experience. The ground tells him. God is discovering that his actions have resulted in murder and perhaps have even provoked Cain to murder. God learns that his overcall contribution to the situation - has had consequences, that is, God's regarding and disregarding of the sacrifices and maybe also his advice to Cain (putting ideas in his head) have had an impact and led to a more problematic situation that in turn has had to be dealt. So it is that this learning God pulls back from the logical punishment of death and shows a care and concern for Cain comparable to the tender care for Adam and Eve in clothing them before their exit from the garden. God gets carried away at times and makes rather extreme responses. The seven-fold vengeance threatened on any who harm Cain indicates that God still has a lot to learn even at the end of this episode. Perhaps God repents quite often of what he has done, and not just at the extreme point prior to the Flood (Genesis 6:6).

God's engagement comes with positive intent in the character of **God the Creator**. New possibilities are being called out at every step and new paths keep appearing. Post-Eden, God, with Eve, creates new human life; post-murder and banishment, Seth is born. What is noticeable is that there is no stopping for God the Creator and no rest for the creative impulse once engaged. God the creator seems to have unfinished business to attend to - this is perhaps the other side of the Learning God who repents - witnessed also in his intent to engage with human beings in relation to their work efforts, and to give advice and impose reparation. But it raises a question: in relation to the narrative perspective on creation taken by Genesis 1, has God not reached day seven yet? Is God the Creator who always needs to butt in on events stuck on day six? But in the wider scene of history, human history, world history, and the history of human experience with God, there is another aspect to this God imbued with creativity, namely, God is a catalyst. God's engagement with the world is a source of

ruptures in proceedings and like a trigger to the discontinuities at which history is made.<sup>114</sup> Creativity works not with set plans and fixed goals on a single track to successful production, but operates within what Schwartz calls “a temporal version of multiplicity”, calling out new possibilities and inviting new re-membering.<sup>115</sup>

Finally, as a point of encouragement and refreshment in the labour of covering such extensive and conflicting God territory, this engaging character is presented to us as **God the Advocate**. This is the one whose option is for the poor. This is the God who favours the so-called ‘worthless’ *Hebel*. God the Advocate hears the cry of blood in the ground and speaks out on behalf of the blood and on behalf of the ground. Cain’s mark of protection is, of course, also the work of this advocate God.

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<sup>114</sup> Cf. Schwartz, 128.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, 124, cf. 159 and 162.

# Chapter 5: Making Our Choices

## A Process for Choosing

Multiplicity points to options and options call for choices. A recognition of the many and varied ways of interpreting the text of Genesis 4, and the multiplex and somewhat conflicted character of God it contains, presents to the reader this fact about biblical texts, indeed this fact about human living: ‘The choice is yours: choose well and your face will be lifted up; choose badly and you can imagine the consequences. You have the freedom. You have the responsibility.’

How are we to choose well? Are there criteria for making good choices and, if so, what are they? For this too is part of the freedom and the responsibility, namely, choosing well the criteria we use and the process we undertake to select interpretations of texts under consideration. A clue is in the word ‘process’. In allowing the multiplicity to remain (as opposed to establishing a unity in terms of uniformity on the basis of a set of principles of truth and right interpretation), we are required to address the process by which we make interpretations. The focus therefore becomes ‘good process’, a feature of contemporary reflection in relation to a wide range of contexts in which people live or work together, make decisions and do projects together, make plans for the future, hold values in common and generally build community. A number of things contribute to good process and they include transparency, open discussion of procedures, highlighting common ground, listening to marginal voices and leaving room for counter viewpoints. It is also important to treat decisions as giving permission for action while recognising that all decisions are open to reconsideration at a later time. Perhaps most critical of all, however, is self-awareness among those involved in the process, particularly among those responsible for leading it.

It is self-awareness that I wish to focus on. In making choices, including interpretations of texts, we need an acute consciousness of who we are and where we are. We also need a high level of awareness and honesty about where we have been – what we have lived through - and where we are hoping to go. Where we have been in large part sets in place the assumptions we carry with us, the preconceptions and prejudices that instinctively frame our thinking. They *frame* our thinking to the extent that we assume they are separate from the picture we are looking at when we look at events and experiences. Awareness of them as *our assumptions* means we recognise them as part of the picture we are perceiving. The frame is

an essential constituent of how we view what is in front of us, just as it is in the context of art, where choice of frame is not separate from, but integral to, the work on display. In the other direction - where we are hoping to go – this is the space in our psyche where expectations reside, in terms of what we expect of ourselves as well as what we expect of others and the world in general, and what they expect of us. This composite of who we are past, present and future is the stuff of self-awareness. Knowing it, we know what really matters to us, in other words, the things that take our attention and engage that bulk of our efforts. These are the matters most demanding of our consciousness or most invasive from our sub-consciousness in so far as they are what disturbs us or breaks the flow of absorption in what we are doing. That is, they are *issues* that surface in us as problems, as dilemmas and, most constructively, as *questions*. They butt into our lives as questions that keep pestering us or questions we hear others ask. We can be inclined to push them away because we cannot answer them or because they are the very questions that *need* to be asked to get to the roots of our problems but these problems seem insurmountable and give the impression that nothing can be changed.

As an example, primary questions that regularly come to mind for me are the following. (There are many more besides, but these in my estimation are some key ‘long-lever’ questions, that is, formulations that give considerable leverage for triggering open-ended answers.)

- Who is in charge?
- What place has goodness in this world?
- Who fits in this world?

‘Who is in charge?’ opens up questions about power and responsibility. Who is in control? Who can do something constructive?

“What place has goodness in this world?’ asks for a appraisal of the world as it is, but it can also call for a decision on how to relate it, that is, a choice for goodness or not. For example, is it possible to say honestly to a newborn child “the facts are friendly.”?<sup>116</sup>

‘Who fits in this world?’ lays bare issues of inclusion and exclusion, succeeding and failing. Who is being hurt? Who is being left out by our economics or politics, or by social custom?

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<sup>116</sup> Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God*, Geoffrey Chapman, London: 1984, 34.

These questions are implicated in the process of selecting my interpretation (or rather interpretations) of the text, but they are involved well before that. These questions are in fact what I unavoidably carry with me to the text and what I present, consciously or unconsciously, as my contribution to conversation every time I engage with the Bible. I do not ever approach a biblical text with nothing. For I cannot converse with it if I come with nothing, i.e. if I have no ‘character’ to interact with the characters before me. If I am to be a subject in conversation, I cannot hide myself and my interests behind a disguise of objective neutrality. Indeed I am as far from being neutral and objective as the physicist who investigates the momentum of an atomic particle. In that case there is an agreed principle to identify the complicity of the subject, namely, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, which holds that, in order to identify the position and velocity of, say, an electron, the observer has to interact with it and therefore interfere with where it was and what it was going to do. Engagement with the text requires me to be a subject speaking to the text. It implicates me together with my needs and preconceptions, or else it could not be engagement. My outline above of the variety of ways of interpreting Genesis 4 and of the multiple character of God revealed therein is itself witness to this engagement. That outline is not presented as a comprehensive coverage of all possible interpretations but in fact is sure to reflect primarily the matters on my mind and the minds of the people I work among, along with the variety of directions we can be inclined to take when a Bible text is our focus of interest. My outline is far from exhaustive: there are other angles that can be taken on this text in addition to those mentioned, other emphases that could be made. My hope in presenting a selection of them in this way is that I have left room for other reflections, others that pick up from mine or step into the spaces where my thoughts have been incomplete or absent.

### **Uncovering a Key Assumption**

But a nagging question continues even with this recognition of diversity in interpretation and this allowing of space for alternatives. It is a question already put to the text but, despite the possible answers and non-answers presented above, the question remains as perplexing as ever. Why did God look favourably on Abel’s sacrifice and not Cain’s? God chose Abel over Cain: why? Indeed, why choose? Could God not have looked upon both? It appears that only one was possible and this conveys a presumption that God’s *regard* is something to be given sparingly. It seems to be assumed that there is something here that is scarce and must not be wasted, namely, God’s favour, indeed God’s love.

For Schwartz this is what is at stake in the text of Genesis 4 and in fact throughout Genesis and the broad sweep of the Old Testament. It represents a dominant voice in the biblical text which, in the case of Cain and Abel, is expressed as competition for God's favour and an "inexplicable rivalry"<sup>117</sup> that leads to death and the installation of violence as a chronic feature of human existence. She asks:

What kind of God is this who chooses one sacrifice over the other? The God who excludes some and prefers others, who casts some out, is a monotheistic God – monotheistic not only because he demands allegiance to himself alone but because he confers his favor on one alone.<sup>118</sup>

The world that such behaviour and actions belong to is a world in which *scarcity* rules. Just as Esau asks Isaac "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" (Gen 27:36), so we might imagine Cain asking God: 'have you not kept any favour for me?' Must there be only *one* who is blessed, *one* who is favoured? This "pernicious principle of scarcity", as Schwartz calls it, means there is competition not just to address the physical needs of human life, but also to fill human emotional needs: "The logic of scarcity even governs love."<sup>119</sup>

If Genesis 4 and Genesis 25 did not treat scarcity as a fundamental fact of human life, there would seem to be no grounds for the rivalry contained in each story and no need for one to lose in order for the other to gain. What is being assumed is that a particular human being will count for something only at the expense of another or others. *That* is the logic of scarcity, a logic that makes rivalry, and its corollary violence, inevitable.

Schwartz relates this to the process of identity formation. Violence eventuates not just because one person or group identifies itself as distinct and different from others and then decides to treat those others badly. Rather, in forming a distinct identity for itself, the one *makes* those who are different *into the Other*. They become 'other' to that person or group's concerns and also, as 'other', immediately a threat to that person or group's concerns because the resources and means to meet needs are considered scarce. From the point of view of us as insiders, those who are outside the group whose identity is forged in this way – in distinction from others – detract from who we are and what we can be sure about. They threaten our sameness with their difference. They impinge upon the boundaries we use to describe ourselves and to inscribe our territory of ownership and belonging. What puts our security

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<sup>117</sup> Schwartz, 2.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, 81.

especially at risk is the possibility that they might want what we have and do something to get it. They could lay claim to who we are and make it part of them, or they could annihilate us to take possession of what we have called our own.

The logic is indeed scarcity, with personal and group identity forged under the terms and conditions of scarcity and the maintenance of identity ruled by it. Identity is a primary concern in the Old Testament, in particular to broker and hold an identity under the terms and conditions of a God - the God of Israel - who claims sole charge in the land and requires sovereign status among the people. Yahweh is to be their God *exclusively* – this God as opposed to other possible options (monolatry). Yahweh is to be the *universal* God of all – there are no other real options (monotheism). Or so the loudest voices in the text continue to maintain.

This same string of strong voices also serves to maintain a situation in which sons must be at odds to ensure that the father's position of authority is not challenged.<sup>120</sup> This kind of authority assumes a scarcity even in families, namely, a scarcity of power. There can be only one authority figure within the family when power is scarce. Therefore, although sons naturally aspire to be like their father and grow into the person they look up to, any aspiring to be like father is interpreted as aspiring to replace him. Friendship between siblings is seen as dangerous because it will upset the balance and maintenance of power. 'Can I be my sister's keeper?' indeed when I have to watch my back continually because of the rivalry prescribed to us. In other words, under scarcity, love is used to hold power. Love itself is treated as a scarce commodity.

If we consider the story of Cain and Abel in these terms and under this perspective of presumed scarcity, it is God who is the father figure, pitting brothers against each other through an inexplicable favouritism. But how could such a figure of God be plausible within the biblical witness? Is it conceivable, let alone arguable, that the God of the Bible could be so capricious or so concerned with power and authority? It seems very strange given the 'steadfast love and faithfulness of the Lord' that echoes throughout the Old Testament. It is there in what many, following Brueggemann, regard to be the Credo of the Old Testament and the text of reference for the character of God in Old Testament theology:<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Cf. Schwartz, 109ff.

<sup>121</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 215, where Exodus 34:6-7 is described as "A Credo of Adjectives".

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, by visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6-7)

But already this contains the seeds of conflict. The tension could have been missed – and the conflict avoided – if I had ceased quoting at the word *sin*, which would certainly be my natural preference. Indeed this Credo has often been selectively quoted, by other Old Testament texts<sup>122</sup> even before generations of worshippers and devotional readers in the centuries since. *Forgiving iniquity and visiting iniquity?* A “counter-testimony”, to use Brueggemann’s term, countering mercy and constancy, observes God’s capriciousness, which is how Jonah, for example, views God’s quick-fire forgiveness of the people of Ninevah. It is also how readers of the book of Jonah might view God’s violent manipulation of nature and innocent sailors to make his point to Jonah.<sup>123</sup> Counter-testimonies are narratives, genealogies and poetry witnessing to things of God outside the tidy pattern of ‘steadfast and sure’ but rather unpredictable and ‘short of nose’ in the interests of maintaining sovereignty. They speak of a God who will not stay in a box. God will not be singular – God alone and only like this – and God will not be totalising – God in charge of all that is. The monotheistic programme can be further destabilised by Brueggemann’s third category, namely, “hidden testimonies” within the text, which are hidden either because they are carefully interwoven and therefore difficult to spot or because dominant strands have presumed they have them conquered. Both counter-testimonies and hidden-testimonies offer alternative understandings of who God is. Their very presence and diversity itself challenges the prevailing dogma about a sure and certain monolithic God, and the tenets that attach to such a God. That is, the existence within the biblical text of testimony, counter-testimony and hidden-testimony, distinguishable and irreducible yet acknowledged and read in all their variety and abundance, raises some measure of doubt about whether scarcity does in fact rule in the world.

Indeed the prevalence and repetitiveness of the polemic of monotheism within the Old Testament is a sure sign for me that this viewpoint felt itself to be threatened. There is no polemic unless there is a significant force to argue against. There is no need for the polemical mode of expression unless the opposition is considered to have a case of sufficient cogency

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<sup>122</sup> e.g. Numbers 14:18; Jeremiah 32:18; Nahum 1:3 and *passim*; Joel 2:13.

<sup>123</sup> Phyllis Trible, “Divine Incongruities in the Book of Jonah”, in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 1998, 198-208.

that it must be put down before it convinces too many people. What is more, the consequences of holding to a God who is singular and total – singularly demanding and totally in charge – are enough to suggest that monotheism will always have problems. Such a God can never be sure of allegiance from people who are called to commitment out of fear of retribution if they fail to abide by God’s requirements. Such a people can never be secure in their identity as God’s people, but will be always looking sideways at potential rivals to their position of favour. The only argument for living with such a God and putting up with an existence that is infused with violence or the threat of violence, is that there is no alternative.

But there is an alternative. Other threads within biblical texts speak of *plenty* and it begins, as Schwartz observes, with the very first commandment in the Bible: “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). This is the opposition to which the polemic of monotheism and scarcity addresses itself. This is the threat: that human beings will believe words also spoken in the Bible claiming that life is a gift from a plentiful source. This alternate vision believes that there is more than enough to go around. It also believes that, like all good gifts, life and the supply of energy for living are not things to be held onto but are always passed on. Life and the means for continuing it and for creating it anew are to be embraced and experienced, not held and possessed. This makes living both an individual enterprise and a combined effort. Each individual can have a sense of self as a centre of activity and feeling *and* acknowledge similar but different selves operating within their own subjectivity and in active engagement with the world around them. With a principle of plenty, there is plenty of room for many centres of life and action and plenty of scope for constructive interaction between these centres. For in the absence of any assumption that they must compete for what they need, each does not need to be its own exclusive centre of reference.

Under the concept of scarcity, identity is forged on the basis of difference as exclusion – I am who I am because I am not you. This is the only option for identity when scarcity rules because the metaphysics of scarcity entails that, if you are anything like me, you threaten to displace me. To be the same means either to swallow up, or to have been swallowed up by, the other who was different but is now the same. But under the concept of plenty, identity has other options: being similar and being different need not be sharply demarcated categories. ‘Plenty’ means there is room for a multiplicity of *similar but different*, for many and varied others who are alike but not exactly identical, “a proliferation of nonidentical repetitions (as repetition was for Kierkegaard) that open up the Same into endless difference.” Schwartz continues:

When identification is nonidentical, there is no motive to displace. An understanding of mimetic desire that presupposes scarcity suggests that once you start loving, either you lose your identity or else the loved one does: someone loses. But if repetition is never identical, new creations, new possibilities signal new identities, rather than rivalry for the Same. Plenitude proliferates identities without violence. And when such plenitude is figured as a God, it is as a God who gives and goes on giving endlessly without being used up, and certainly without jealously guarding his domain.<sup>124</sup>

In other words, it is conceivable that God sees no threat in sharing creativity with humans, with Eve who brings children to birth and with Cain and his descendants who develop culture and crafts in the context of city life. It is also conceivable that God could look more than one way and have regard for the sacrifice of both brothers who come to offer their life and work. Schwartz argues that “this vision of plenty” is also in the Bible, “embedded” in it.<sup>125</sup> The dominant voice has, however, ensured that it is a minority report, by drowning it out or by blending it in so that it is virtually hidden from hearing. A dominant tradition of biblical interpretation within the church, which has tended to align itself to the stronger voices of the text, has helped to entrench this situation. But there is an alternative already available on site in the Bible, and this is where my theme of the readers’ role is crucial. As I have already argued, we are well advised, as readers, not to suppose we approach the Bible with neutral objectivity. We cannot honestly nor effectively do that. We always show up with questions and with the concerns which, like the tip of the iceberg, are the visual indicators of the mass that lurks within our sea of living, both personal and cultural. Or, to put it another way, what is on our minds and comes most readily to the fore in conversations with others, including biblical texts, is the stuff that ‘sticks out’ because it hurts or disturbs or festers – like a tooth or a toe that one is only aware of when it is sore, and then acutely aware. Troubles seem especially adept at hitching a ride when we approach a biblical text.

As we read the text with our questions and concerns honestly before us, we listen to it as our conversation partner speaking back to us. We hear voices that address us, that is, voices that answer our questions or aspects of them, voices that are comforting, or are wise in their advice, or provocative or suggestive of change we need to undertake. Sometimes the clearest voices that we hear will be the dominant ones within the text, for in our searching it is those voices that give the needed energy and open up the future for us. Sometimes the clearest

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<sup>124</sup> Schwartz, 117-118.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, 118.

voices in our ears will be the Bible's counter-testimony, connecting with our need for lament or complaint, protesting for us and with us and, in their way, giving us a chance to 'get on with our lives'. And sometimes our troubles will call out the voices that have been hidden: what we raise with the text allows us to hear the undercurrent that is carried in the text's silences or faint whispers and their surfacing of hope connects with our own need. The voices we hear relate directly to our needs, when we are up front about our needs and because we are up front with our needs and consider them important enough for the bible to have voices to speak to them. In this way we approach openly – that is, our questions are genuine, not tricks to test the text – and without conditions laid out beforehand regarding what will count as right things to hear. This vulnerability lets the text speak the voice or voices that relate most closely to our situation. The process of coming to the text with receptivity, and with a readiness to be surprised by what we hear, is what can uncover the Bible's minority reports and "hear to speech"<sup>126</sup> the voices that the dominant polemic has sought to silence.

It is in this manner that the subordinate counter-testimony and the often silenced hidden testimony can come to the fore and proclaim their convictions about God, about God in relation to human beings and about human beings in relation to one another and other elements of God's world. Does this then give us the truth about these things, the real truth that the majority report has been hiding? Is this the clue to right interpretation of the Bible? That is, when silenced voices are heard and victims vindicated, will the truth reign and the violence end? The problem is that, as long as we hold on to the expectation that there is one right interpretation, we will continue the rivalry. This singular expectation keeps hunting for the threads in the Bible that are to be decreed the right and legitimate ones and for the testimony that is certified correct. One method could be to distinguish the words belonging to the victims who need to be raised up from those belonging to the oppressors who need to be put down and authorise the former in contradistinction to the latter. But then victims would become victimizers and the hurt and anger from their own suffering gets turned upon others, while oppressors would be oppressed in turn and made the new victims. To add insult to injury, God would be fully implicated in this as spearhead of the perpetuated violence. First Nations theologian Robert Allen Warrior observes that "as long as people believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conquerer."<sup>127</sup> Whether

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<sup>126</sup> This phrase, which I find both descriptive of the experience of good conversation and prescriptive for deepening communication and relationships, can be traced to Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*, Beacon Press, Boston: 1985, 99.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Schwartz, 58.

covert or open, violence will remain the policy so long as it is assumed that only one way can be right and so long as truth itself is treated as a scarce commodity, to be possessed by only one story, one thread, or one school of thought. But it does not have to be like this. There is another option as Schwartz identifies and endorses:

But when truth itself is reconceived, understood as proliferating, it becomes truths, or better stories, that illuminate and enrich each other with their variety and multiplicity rather than being partial instalments on the one true story. Multiple accounts become compatible instead of competing, and difference is not agonistic because it is not fixed.<sup>128</sup>

### **From Polemic to Dialectic**

The dominant tenor of biblical texts presents us with a polemic of one truth against many falsehoods, one God against many idols, each of which can be traced to an assumption of scarcity in contrast to plenty. The language of the first two is already a rhetorical expression of the polemic: it expects us to be clear as to which side of the opposition holds the high ground – truth as opposed to falsehood, God as opposed to idols. But in relation to the opposites ‘scarcity’ and ‘plenty’ the high ground is far from clear: scarcity and plenty are *alternative* interpretations of the way the world is, each arguable on the basis of experience. What is more, there are significant variations in experience at different times and places, such that neither is able to produce final and conclusive evidence for their case. When scarcity is used in argument in the biblical context, as elsewhere, it cannot rely on empirical evidence to seal its case but must simply be assumed to be self-evident to all. Yet, if scarcity is taken to be a self-evident fact of life, as basically the way things are, the balance of life is put at risk. With only part of human experience in the frame – experiences of shortages and limitations as opposed to experiences of bonuses and excellence – the chances of making wise decisions and undertaking constructive courses of action will be reduced. But there is a comparable problem when plenty is treated unassailably as ‘the way things are’. When plenty rules, the balance is also thrown out, for example, when unwise, usually inexperienced, farmers indulge in over-expenditure in a boom year or when the Israelites in the wilderness post-Sinai complained about lack of food and were given an abundance which poisoned them (Num 11:31-35 “the graves of craving”).

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<sup>128</sup> Schwartz, 173.

It is not possible to settle this argument between scarcity and plenty constructively. There is no third way, no blend of scarcity and plenty that resolves the conflict and forms a single principle for human life or a unified description of human experience. This is however no great loss, because if scarcity and plenty could be combined in one melting pot, that would entail dissolving the sharp edge of each and denying the independent reality of both within human experience. Indeed the polemic within the Bible, like the sharpness of debate and difference within multi-party politics in modern democracies, is vital to the *process* of seeking truth. Truth-seeking, or rather – since the world ‘truth’ may continue to suggest one correct answer to any question – seeking what is life-giving as opposed to death-dealing, is an ongoing process, which achieves not fixed certainties but provisional sureness at most, and needs some dynamic impetus to keep it moving. Polemic supplies that dynamism, with little chance of peace and quiet while the debate rages.

My suggestion is that we take the polemical relationship of scarcity and plenty one step further and see it as a dialectical relationship. Polemic is driven by opposition and sharpens differences to the point that one must be chosen against the other. Dialectic is driven by incompleteness and reveals the differences to be interdependent and generative of action. If two things relate in dialectic, whenever one is examined closely and considered in its separateness and distinctness, it is found to contain elements of, or pointers towards, the other. The one somehow requires the other in order to hold its own. For example, the concept of scarcity generates the need to secure plenty for oneself and one’s own and this requires a plentiful supply somewhere if it is to be sustained. The concept of plenty introduces complacency about consumption and only the acknowledgement of possible future scarcity can curtail its excess. Each concept can in effect only be understood adequately in relation to the other and it is notable that evidence for the one as the prevailing reality of life is always presented by denying any signs, or negating the importance, of the other

Dialectic, however, does not just involve an intellectual game in which two opposites turn into each other, each showing both the incompleteness of the other and the illogic of any claim to stand alone. This incompleteness and illogic are no mere abstract concepts because they are triggers to actual movement. The generational move between ideas is in fact a generational process within experience and therefore a means for creating new experience. As I understand it, dialectic is insight gained and movement made through conflict and debate between opposites. For, when conflict and debate are engaged openly, they involve an interaction which, in its occurrence, reveals elements that will not stay confined to the conflict

and cannot be defined only in terms of binary opposition. What is generated in open interaction between the two sides of the dialectic takes these opposing sides beyond their agonistic stance into a partial joining of energies. A perfect example of this is given by the very way that human beings deal in practice with the contrasting facts of plenty and scarcity, and their more general expression, blessings and curses. The human condition is characterised by a mixture of feeling blessed with life's good gifts (people to love, food, shelter and a world around to enjoy) and cursed with the struggle to get what is needed and cope with suffering. To live well within this condition of being human is to live with this mixture of gift and struggle as a continual interchange. It entails expecting and accepting both aspects, recognising the dangers of imbalance (including the injustice of starvation and hoarded food supplies existing side by side in modern nations), being ready to enjoy what there is to enjoy and refusing to rationalise the fact of suffering. It could be said that scarcity and plenty are valuable as *practical* ideas of the Kantian kind, i.e. maxims of thought and action reminding us that circumstances can always change and that the future provision of needs is as unpredictable as the weather. The balancing act we undertake within our psyches along with the fluctuations between good days and bad days, building strength in the one, digging deep in the other, are *dialectic in action*.

As I see it biblical texts are also dialectic in action. Scarcity and plenty are not only opposing facts – although opposed they must be in order to reveal the nature and importance of each other – but also joint facts. They are two threads of memory: they help re-tell past experience by bringing together the sense of life as sheer gift and the sense of life as hard-won struggle. With scarcity and plenty both in the frame, memory is re-remembered and re-presented to and one is thereby better equipped to describe the present honestly and to envision the future plausibly and positively, so that wise choices can be made with greater likelihood of life-giving effects. At times the balance between scarcity and plenty shifts, as circumstances change – with good seasons and bad seasons – and as people's perception of their circumstances changes – under the sway of persuasive ideologies, convincing leaders or dominant worldviews. There are points where the balance pitches so badly that failure and even calamity are the best words to describe the situation. But these become turning points: they are ruptures or discontinuities which require a new view to be taken and a renewed claim made on the balance between scarcity and plenty. Indeed it is at these times of rupture and discontinuity that history is made<sup>129</sup> and personal values are refigured. Human beings facing

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<sup>129</sup> Cf. Schwartz, 128 following Michel Foucault.

terminal illness or the death of loved ones are a constant witness to this as the upheaval of their lives provokes major re-evaluation and the old life is rated shallow in comparison to the deepened understanding of what really matters in the life we live together.

## Chapter 6: Ending As We Began – With Questions

If polemic thinks it will achieve its purpose when its opposition is defeated and its truth stands secure, dialectic knows no set goal and has no prospective resting place. Polemic seems dead set on closure; dialectic recognises there is no closure, but only open opportunities, so long as life remains. The process continues just as the tension between the opposites continues and is driven by the continuing claim and energy of each. To pursue one's questions openly, with the honesty and receptivity indicated in the previous chapter, means to hear responses that both address the questions at hand and raise new ones. Solutions sought in openness have a two-fold advantage. New understanding of one's life and situation can be gained which, although provisional and making no claim to absolute truth, does give confidence for moving forward. But we also receive new means to articulate the issues that continue to concern us, new ways to formulate the key questions of living. At this point the possibilities are, once again, legion, although I will select three questions in particular because these are the ones that seem to me to be at the core of our contemporary "iceberg" of concern. They are key questions for the people I live and work among, for the country I live in, but they are also relevant, I believe, beyond those geographical limitations. If not in the specific way of representing them, then in some associated way that will perhaps be evoked by my representation, these concerns are global. My questions arise within three key areas triggered by reflections on Genesis 4 - the fact of rivalry, the demand for justice and the conflicted character of God.

### **Can "the Cowman" and "the Farmer" be Friends?**

As soon as they get these two names [Cain and Abel], we see that one is going to be the victim and the other's going to be something else. And as soon as they choose their professions, or are assigned to them, we think of that line of Rodgers and Hammerstein's ... "The cowboys and the farmers can be friends" – which means, we know, they're not going to be.<sup>130</sup>

The rivalry between two people or two groups who are similar but not exactly the same is a very familiar experience and almost seems to be a fact of life. It can be good fun, for example, on the sports-field, for players at all levels and also for supporters especially at regional or international level. But it can be dangerous when the rivalry factor becomes entrenched as the central focus of the encounter. The differences between rivals predominate

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<sup>130</sup> John Barth, in Moyers, 98.

to the extent that they mask detection of similarities and connections. Rivalry puts the fundamental interconnection and interdependence of living things under stress. Between human beings it undermines the connectedness between those who are in fact the same species, a connectedness that is part of a wider set of interrelationships and interdependence with the multitude of forms and beings that together constitute this world. When the interwoven and interactive nature of reality is recognised the expression ‘God’s good creation’ is an apt name for it, pointing to the creativity at its core that drives it as an integrated whole and means it is an ongoing process of differentiation into multiple, indeed infinite, possible realities. Things that are quite similar can feel pressure to distinguish themselves from others like them, in order to stand out in some way and avoid being confused with them. With things that are markedly different, the need to stand out is not so great. It is closely related ones who are most likely to view each other as rivals for attention and distinction.

The drama of Genesis 4 brings to attention rivalry not just between siblings but between different kinds of farmers. It was apparently part of ancient Middle Eastern culture to look more favourably upon those who worked with stock as opposed to those who worked the soil. Of course, the possession of animals was a visible sign of economic status, and if you had no animals you were probably too poor to acquire any. The Jesus we meet in the Gospels incorporated both agricultural and pastoral types in his stories and his teaching but, although the title “the Good Shepherd” has a significant place in church doctrine and liturgy, somehow “the Good Sower” has not gained the same status. Rivalry drove relationships among the colonisers in North America (as the song from musical show “Oklahoma” indicates), as it did in Aotearoa New Zealand, with the main damper to conflict between them being their common disregard for people very different from both of them, namely, the indigenous peoples they were colonising. Rivalry continues in New Zealand farming, not as a major cause for concern, but as a subtle undercurrent that simply needs to be taken into consideration. For example, the organisation that has traditionally provided the arena for discussion among farmers, and lobbying power with Government, is Federated Farmers, which has regional and national sections for each type of farming, with new sections developed in recent years to give space for new enterprises, e.g. deer and horticulture. One of the primary skills needed in those elected to be Chair of the combined group at the regional level, or to be President at the national level, is that of being a moderator between sections,

able to relate to, and be trusted by, each of them. It may be with reluctance but most will admit that there is an informal pecking order among the sections.

Healthy competition is one way of describing this rivalry as it is experienced in practice among farmers in New Zealand. And it is not a situation confined to the farming sector. Other occupations and professions could tell their own story of pecking orders and degrees of misunderstanding or very cautious respect. A spirit of competition is a significant motivating factor in many areas of human endeavour, and it can be a very enjoyable aspect of striving to do well and achieve higher goals. 'Friendly rivalry', whether it is between neighbouring farmers watching each other's paddocks, lawyers in a court of law, mothers comparing notes on their babies' development, golfers out on the course on Club Day, or a myriad of other possible examples, is not an oxymoron, but an honest and graphic description of a significant motivating factor.

It is not the competitive element itself that is the problem when rivalry becomes so chronic that destructiveness takes over. It is the priority given to 'difference' when differences matter more than anything else such that points of commonality become secondary and even non-existent in any consideration of how to behave towards the rival. Combine this intense sense of difference with the belief that there is only so much to go around – goods, land, money, women, (men,) etc. – and the result is a recipe for the kinds of rivalries currently bringing fear to local communities and national politics and terror to international relations. Under a perspective of plenty, a strengthening of ethnic identity would be a cultural flourishing to be celebrated. Indeed having both scarcity and plenty in view as dual facts of life, cultural differences carry no necessary threat to the territory or freedom of one's own kind. But under the perspective of scarcity giving priority to difference raises the spectre of tribalism.

Intergenerational differences can also evoke concern, for 21<sup>st</sup> century societies, although without the level of aggression already ignited by cultural and ethnic differences. Positively, the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen a much wider acknowledgement that different age groups, along with other ways the people get categorised, have their own valid perspective and have a right to be heard in the public arena. But at the same time the cult of youth grows stronger and, in the battle for employment in a more and more specialised market, unemployment and under-employment is a growing concern for those past middle age or less physically or mentally able. The increasing number of over sixties, however, adds another element to the potential pot of resentment: will the 'grey' voice come to dominate in the

politics of democracy? In the midst of this environment of contested jobs, wealth and the right to be heard, fear has become more prevalent, e.g. fear of a social underclass, fear of immigrants and, more generally, fear of the other. With immigration comes difference in religion. Rivalry in religion, whether combined with ethnic differences or standing on its own, is perhaps the most perplexing and fearful of all, and the one with regard to which Christians cannot escape some sense of shame:

Abraham came to be remembered as father not only of the ancient Hebrews, but also of Christians and Muslims. It could have been one community. Sadly enough, these [memories as] revisions succumbed to competition for the status of the true children of Abraham, to the scarcity principle. The myth of common humankind – the sons of Adam – splintered all too quickly into the terrors of Cain and Abel and their legacy of ethnic, national and religious hatred.<sup>131</sup>

Such rivalry is not only inter-religious, but also intra-religious. Sects and denominations have a long history within Christianity but more recently, and perhaps more insidiously, groupings have formed within churches like my own that align themselves in terms of specific theological differences and their moral and political corollaries. The identity of the grouping is cast on the basis of statements of faith, in the form of articles of belief or affirmations of justice, and boundary lines are also drawn, sometimes explicitly, often implicitly through a shared assumption that only people like us belong with us. It can be possible to visit a congregation at worship and quite quickly identify, by verbal and body language, along with how the liturgy is organised, who is where and how leadership is expressed, the type of theology the congregation adheres to. One can also pick up a clear message that to belong here you need to be people like us. Yet I could imagine visiting a similar group of people in their worship and *not* experiencing such a sense of assertion and demarcation: *if* the manner and the language indicated they were simply *telling their story* of faith and expressing their hopes and fears before God. The difference in this situation would be that their liturgy was not purporting to make universal claims but was an offering of their perspective with an implicit invitation to listen in. Such an approach presumes that there is room in the church, as in life generally, for a diversity of viewpoints. In contrast, within Christianity theological rivalry is thriving currently in an atmosphere of presumed scarcity in the face of a sense of inevitable decline, with resources of people and finances shrinking year by year.

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<sup>131</sup> Schwartz, 159.

It is my experience that, when rivalry rules, exhortations to cooperation achieve very little. Exhortations do not address the fear that drives the rivalry. Perhaps one can provoke guilt or shame at the realisation that we are being rivals when we should not be, but guilt and shame are unlikely to be leading operatives in achieving change in the situation. We may be ashamed of what we are doing but, under the rules of rivalry, we also believe we have no option if we are to survive. Cooperation and competition are indeed options for us, but we see them as mutually exclusive: either we compete or we cooperate. If competition has arisen because we are similar but different, rather passionate about what we are doing and keen to excel ourselves, then letting go the competitive element means letting go an essential part of our motivation and drive. It would also mean letting go the difference between us and our rival, with the risk that we will cease to be who we are and become those we are competing with. If my integrity and purpose are this much at stake, cooperation will be a hazardous course to take. Cooperation seems to mean capitulation.

But a rethink is needed and a re-visioning of what is taking place in such interaction between individuals and groups who are similar but different. Under the tutelage of our paradigm of scarcity and plenty as a dialectic-in-action, things look different. Both are well-founded facts of our existence. Held together and seen in mutual interaction, the fact of scarcity and the fact of plenty generate a constructive and creative understanding of life and therefore options for constructive and creative action. The polemic of scarcity against the vision of plenty it opposes is transformed. Now we also notice that, under conditions of rivalry because of presumed scarcity, identity and difference can also be reduced to polemical opposition threatening destructive consequences. But again a different view can be gained by recognising both their essential distinctness and their potential for interaction. The dilemma of having an identity as a person or as a group in the face of the multiplicity of differences around us is a genuine dilemma. But it will not be solved by dissolving differences into a single identity solution nor by obliterating all others from sight. Any effective solution must be a *resolution*, arising out of the negotiations of interaction. Such a resolution of identity in the face of differences will of course be provisional and always open to new negotiations. What identity and difference create in dialectical interaction is in fact genuine community. In all its variety of forms, community is where a sense of who we are is found in the midst of diversity. And this is achieved not by defining who we are and using our definition as a fence to include and exclude, but by telling our stories together and linking them into a joint but fluid story – narrative identity rather than definitional identity.

I suggest there is also potential for a constructive outcome with competition. Indeed, this is what happens in practice, as I see it. On the one hand, the other person or group is seen as ‘the competition’ with one’s focus on actively outwitting and outstripping the competitor. On the other hand, the other is looked at in a somewhat detached way, to be respected in their own right with the focus a more passive observing and valuing of the other. If we treat our options for dealing with other people as a matter of either competition or respect we risk the extremes – no holds barred methods to achieve victory or do nothing and go nowhere. Practical experience reveals another option. Accepting both as important - both the competitive spirit and appreciative respect - gives them the opportunity to reveal their ‘dialectical fruits’. What happens when one combines competition and respect is a joining of energies – the energy that is the motivation to achievement and the energy that comes from accepting the other has something to give. Such freely engaged cooperation has the power of synergy in which the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts.

But *in practice* the question continues to hold: can friendship thrive between people who have enough in common that they can feel ‘too close for comfort’ for keeping identity intact? And is it possible for real friendships to form between people different enough to give rise to comparisons and institute a pecking order? With human experience continuing to supply strong evidence for both scarcity and plenty as facts of life and realities on this planet earth, the relationship between these two facts is pivotal to determining how human beings relate to one another and to the planet itself. It is foundational to the attitudes of human beings to the very task of living their lives. How will the lines between identity and difference be drawn? Will some claim power to control the lines at the expense of others? Or is it possible for human beings to change the grammar they use to process their experience and turn the power battle of polemic into an interactive dialectic that can choose life, not death?

### **What Do We Do With People Who Have Done Bad Things?**

‘Cain is a bad person, so he should be punished.’ The view that he was bad from birth<sup>132</sup> has little following within modern scholarship, but popular perception of the story appears to treat him as a chronic case of badness and beyond redemption once the murder is committed. Indeed, categorising is one way of dealing with bad people, for example, by separating them out from the sheep who have not crossed the line into badness and, if they are very bad,

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<sup>132</sup> e.g. Philo, Calvin, see pp.18-19 above.

confining them in a goat-hold or, if only partially bad, simply labelling with the stigma of goat identity.

Reactions to the fate of Cain among today's readers, and in church tradition through the centuries, sound strident notes that are in harsh harmony with the contemporary voices heard in Western culture as it faces increasing social violence. Regarding Cain we are told: he is a criminal; he should by rights have died for what he did; his banishment is a lesson for us all. , Regarding those who commit violent acts today, we hear through the media, and especially on talk-back radio: they should be punished; lock them up and throw away the key; if there is no justice there is no closure for victims. Vengeance says, not the Lord, but the culture. Or the culture presumes that vengeance is what the Lord says.

Maybe it can be traced to early instincts. Children speak the phrase 'that's not fair!' from a very young age so perhaps getting as much as the person next to us (often a sibling) is a primitive force, even prior to any influence or example. The question whether its causality is innate or environmental – nature or nurture – is probably academic because it is ensconced very early in life. I, as a little child, demand consistency to ensure that I get what I *need* and from that it is a short step to demanding what I need because it is what I *deserve*. It is then another short step to carry this across to what happens when things go wrong: if *I* get into trouble for something I do, then others should get into trouble too when they do the same sort of thing. The sense that everyone should get their 'just desserts' and in this way justice becomes linked to punishment.

What can satisfy this demand for a justice that closes the case? What can establish a fairness that ties up the loose ends and puts an end to complaint? Some sort of payment seems to suggest itself as a way to put the situation in order. It seems to need some kind of pay-back or *retribution* to put the wrong-doer back on the positive side of the tribute ledger with someone or something. Perhaps it relates to the tendency in human experience to simplify very complex realities – e.g. actions, interactions, desires, intentions, effects and consequences – in an attempt to make them manageable. That is, the complexity of decisions and circumstances, of personalities and potentialities, are simplified into the notion that good people do good things and bad people do bad things. Good people gain credits from the good things they do and can be seen as rewarded by the society that benefits from their good deeds (through conferring prosperity or status) or they are somehow rewarded later, with the help of an after-life of reckoning. Bad people do things to their discredit because their actions do damage,

and any damage done must be paid for by the bad people in order to level the accounts. But why is this call made to extract payment in order to equalise the situation?

It seems to me to be part of a wider call for law and order to ensure the kind of security that goes with set systems and guarantee of operating according to fixed rules. There is a yen for certainty in the form of a deep-seated desire to know what will come next and be sure where we stand with it. But, as we have seen a number of approaches to Genesis 4 indicate,<sup>133</sup> this is not the most constructive way to react. The lesson for Cain to learn is that there is no certainty about what will happen and why it will happen. There is nothing to gain by following the need to know: one simply has to learn to live with what happens as it happens. In the face of this mysterious unfairness of the world and of our individual and communal interactions with it, we are wise to take it on the chin, so to speak, and, with Qohelet, embrace the goodness that life has to offer. The theme of embracing life in terms of enjoying the world around us and loving its people gets a very positive response when it features in funerals I conduct. If I am using the reading from Ecclesiastes 3 I always include the following verses:

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever. (Ecclesiastes 3:9-14a)

But despite appreciation of this wisdom for constructive living the impulse to vengeance with its focus on sorting out the past still seems to hold its ground. The urge to comprehend the basic incomprehensibility of existence remains strong. A caution needs to be spoken at this point. In considering God and justice to be beyond comprehension, we need to make sure we do not thereby mystify God and justice and use this mystification as a means to control. In my opinion 'mystery' can be introduced to the investigation too soon and imposed on a reality that remains ambiguous, as containing a mixture of both mystery and clarity. The urge to ask more questions and discover new knowledge and skills is constructive and enhances the life-options of the people involved. Mystery as a comprehensive concept can be used to close the

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<sup>133</sup> E.g. the ethical lesson of choosing to master sin, pp.18-19 above and the theological point – this is the way life is, and God is, best face the reality of life outside Eden, pp.25-26, 35-36, 43 above.

investigation into the ambiguity of realities we encounter. It leaves a gap for gnosticism to move in with its potential elitism of the ‘keepers of the mystery’ (whether they know anything about it or not they keep it mysterious). Qohelet effectively subverts the temptation to gnosticism by recognising something ultimately absurd and unknowable (*hevel*) about reality but never ceasing in his striving, even if it feels like ‘shepherding the wind’:

Qohelet is not bowing his head in pious humility before life’s mysteries or modestly confessing an inability to unravel puzzles too great for him. He has discovered that some things are inequitable and senseless.<sup>134</sup>

Qohelet has probed deeply into the logic of the world, in the philosopher’s endeavour to uncover a rational system driving all things and actions. But there is no all encompassing rational system to be found. “The world is only as logical as it is found to be,” is a phrase that echoes from my philosophy undergraduate days<sup>135</sup>. For Qohelet this is the way it is, but the strength of his presentation is that he does not stop with the conception of fundamental irrationality: his faith and philosophy entail a “refusal to let the ‘broader view’ diminish the significance of individual suffering in the here and now.”<sup>136</sup> <sup>137</sup> Fundamental and mysterious unfairness does not mean we should be resigned to suffering nor try to live in detachment from the suffering. For Qohelet mystery and suffering are held together in all their conflict and painfulness and, out of the tension they generate, a possibility for response opens up:

We want to know what Qohelet *really* believes. But Qohelet goes no further. He is at a dead end. *He* is frustrated and his readers should be too. Life *is* frustrating, and Qohelet refuses to make it any easier for us. His only response – not solution – is to urge us to embrace the good things that come to hand. We must tend our garden, though it will wither.<sup>138</sup>

Qohelet accepts the breakdown of “cosmopolis”, that is the stable and predictable coherence of all things. He recognises the failure of physical, rational and moral systems to stay intact under the conditions of real existence. Qohelet confronts the end of life and its comprehensibility, but then, as confronted and not denied, it is no longer just an end but an

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<sup>134</sup> Fox, 35.

<sup>135</sup> University of Otago in the Rev Henry Thornton’s classes on Kant.

<sup>136</sup> Fox, 69.

<sup>137</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 47, 1985, 42 and “A Shape for Old Testament Theology II: Embrace of Pain”, 405.

<sup>138</sup> Fox, 70.

“edge”, a “threshold” on which this new move of embracing life can be made.<sup>139</sup> In Qohelet’s understanding *hebel* is thus ‘emptiness’, but not entirely so: it may be absence, but it is more like the absence that is known because of what was present whose presence seems to linger. Beal chooses to translate *hebel* as vapour, to catch this kind of meaning. Vapour is “the trace of a trace... The vapor is not simply emptiness, but the trace of haunting presence: a vapor trail of the divine.”<sup>140</sup>

But this “dead end” which can be experienced as ‘edge’ retains the fractures and disjunctions that threaten a final end. It is not emotionally neutral and not easily emotionally calm. It therefore offers a locus for raising another question relevant to Genesis 4: Why do people get so angry like they do? One important answer, as I see it, relates to the incomprehensibility of unfairness. If one assumes that life is supposed to be fair and able to be conformed to structures of rationality, the only way to stave off the “dead end” of irrationality is to fight against it. This is anger that instinctively lashes out in the unconsidered belief that for every action there must be an equalising reaction. But equality cannot be the main matter at hand: indeed it is not among the realistic expectations of a world that is in continual process, with possibilities becoming actualities and energies dissipating and differentiating into a proliferation of shapes and forms. Equality is a description of events in stasis. A break is taken, a pause to life and a halt to action, to weigh up the situation and see whether the equality scales are in balance. The concept of equality functions well as an ideal against which to assess the world at a particular point in time, to check for the injustice of unequal situations that could be different, so that human energies can be used as part of the world’s process to enhance the more life-giving possibilities and limit the more death-dealing ones. But when equality is the ruling principle for life, it makes something static the measure for action, a kind of contradiction in terms. It therefore promotes reaction to past situations prior to any proaction for the sake of future opportunities. The endeavour is primarily to *equalise* the situation, to achieve closure to past events, which puts the life-process at risk of tracking to a dead end with little energy left for pursuing new openings. Seeking payment to reinstate order takes this past-centred perspective and aims to *produce* equality in static form and therefore lifeless. In contrast the advice to Cain points to the future, encouraging him to seek a way of responding that would equip him well for subsequent situations and would keep his resource base strong (i.e. keep him on the land and keep him connected to others). What he

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<sup>139</sup> Timothy K. Beal, “C(ha)osmopolis”, in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Linafelt Tod and Timothy K. Beal, 303-304.

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*, 303.

needs is a store of experience in coping with whatever happens without falling apart. He needs confidence in his ability to feel the pain and unfairness of life yet get on with living by getting on with the people and world around him.

The order that needs to be restored in the light of the injustice of Cain's situation of receiving a bad report for his crops – and in the light of the injustice perpetrated by Cain in killing his brother - is not order reinstated by payment to level the balance of accounts, but the order that in physics and chemistry is called negentropy. This is the order that holds energy ready for action. It is the stored supply of *potential energy* that converts, when it is released, into motion or heat and thereby generates new actualities. Like the order-making that goes with housework, building up negentropy is a continual process of re-ordering. The dynamics of planet earth are such that the opposite process of entropy, which results in the reduction of stored forms of energy and a concomitant increase in dissipated, dispersed forms, is given some pause by the energy inputs of living organisms with their interests in building up negentropy to sustain their existence. Housework likewise re-orders by re-producing the kind of negentropy that is called tidiness and cleanness, in response to the recurring entropy of dirt and messiness. Doing housework adds to the potential energy of the situation - notably to the potential energy of the people whose house and home it is - by renewing the living space in which they find themselves reordered and restored. Note that this also happens whenever the soil is tilled and cared for, when, like Qohelet, we “tend our garden, though it will wither”.

So what would it mean to re-order the situation when violent crime is committed? What do we do with people who have done bad things? What do we do with people who have had bad things done to them? Where is the restoration of energy for life for those made victims of violence, for the community and society polluted by the causes and effects of violence in its midst, and for the whole world's ecology scarred by destructive forces pulling apart interconnected threads within its web? And where is restoration to be found for the thread who is the perpetrator? The question remains open. But at least if it is recognised to be a real question, and not already answered by systems of payment and expectations of vengeance, then we may be able to start negotiating some restorative resolutions.

### **Can We Speak of a Multi-Character God in Church?**

Multiple interpretations of the text of Genesis 4 may raise a few eyebrows, and set in course lively debate about their differing merits and whether in fact we can stand in judgment of them. But a multiple character for God will do more than raise eyebrows: it can provoke

outrage at the idea of a God with conflicting characteristics, unpredictable and unreliable in relationship and in conflict if not in contradiction with Godself. And it can incite the protest that we are making God too small by speaking in the very human terms of ‘character’. To be ‘God’ within the lives of people, God’s nature needs to be ‘Godlike’. For how can a person form a spiritual relationship with a God whose nature appears to be rather human, or is in some way under question? Can people live with a God who is not able to be completely and unreservedly ‘God’ for them, i.e. their ultimate reference and fundamental source of strength, aspiration and value? Can people glorify and enjoy forever – unconditionally and without limits – a God who is conflicted?

What do people hope to achieve when they bring themselves to church? This is a closely related question that may be able to help focus the issue. Alternatively it could be put this way: what do we expect from offering our life and work to God in worship? It seems Cain brought with him a particular view of God and therefore he came with expectations to match. The way the story is told suggests a particular conception of the divinity. Cain’s God is distinctly one who favours or rejects, who gives out blessings or curses. He – and presumably Abel too – came with offerings in order to try to please this God. What happened next is history, as Cain’s – and Abel’s - world fell apart. Whether Cain ever tried to worship God again we do not know. Some of his descendants did, according to Genesis 4:26, and we might wonder what they expected from their worship, or what importance the text’s editors placed on it, or what readers over the centuries since have made of it. Favour or rejection, blessing or curse, are certainly part of the biblical story of God. Cain is not wrong in his conception, but we note that may be seen as another case of simplifying the complexity of God. This urge to simplify God’s complex reality relates to the tendency identified in the previous section. The human condition means a mixture of good times and bad times, blessings and curses, a past carrying both memories and scars and a future met with both anticipation and fear. It is therefore understandable that human beings seek certainty and in particular certainty about God. If nowhere else could we not have certainty with God? With the rest of life and all its relentless change, can we not have the constancy and security of some absolutes at church? In any case, people surely need to know where we stand with their God just as they need a secure foundation to take the panic out of the future. But my problem with this is that, for all the genuineness of the need and the appeal of the promise of reliability, this expectation perpetuates the monotheistic mistake. It makes God singular and total: God is *this* God as we define it – this *particular* God; and this God is God over all –

*universal*. Even if this were not something of a philosophical outrage – a particular, universal God - even if we can live with the contradiction by renaming it ‘paradox’ which some people do (but in its static singularity they are denied multiplicity’s generative option of dialectic), then the practical consequences of holding fast to such a God – the culture of violence it breeds among human beings and against the earth – are surely grounds to condemn it.

This totalising and singularising tendency in people’s conception of God is found in a similar approach taken to the Bible. The Bible is a sacred book. It stands as the sacred book of Christians and it contains, although in a different order, the sacred book of the Jewish people. It is respected by other religions also. This book is the common, *tangible* ground for the people whose faith leads them to read it and converse with it. It is a symbol of their *living* common ground, namely, Yahweh or Christ. It is aptly named ‘sacred’ – or holy – because, as sacred, it contains dynamic witness to the whole of reality - God’s reality, people’s realities and the earth’s realities. It has been formed and collated in a way that has made some judgements about content, but there is no uniform ordering of the witness or filtering out of all problematic content. That is, the Bible has not been subject to either definitive systematizing or exhaustive censoring. But the sacred is, like the mark of Cain,<sup>141</sup> both blessing and curse, awesome and awful. To interpret the sacred in any uniform way and present it in accordance with any structural system is in fact to de-sacralise it and even to desecrate it. Keeping it sacred means respecting its holiness, that is, letting the Bible stand as it is in its fullness and consequently seething with energies both creative and destructive. The fact is that we cannot draught out the creative from the destructive energies or endeavour to distinguish texts of life from texts of death, without doing an injury to the Godly energy stored within the whole. Acknowledging anything less than the fullness of the sacred text - for example by selecting out only part and denying the rest or by glossing over the contradictions that arise from making some truths within the text absolute truths - may well block access to the very voices that could prove life-giving at some or other time and place. The question is therefore turned around: if we do injustice to the Bible when we treat it in anything less than its fullness, can we do justice to the ‘Godness’ of God if we do not find some way of speaking – in church – about God’s multiplexity?

Another important matter to take into account is the level of complaint within the church about what has not been said in worship. It is a commonplace when a controversial

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<sup>141</sup> Cf. McNutt, referred to on p.29 above.

theologian comes to New Zealand (or a controversial New Zealand theologian makes the news) to hear comments about how ‘old hat’ the controversy is and how mainstream the issues are in biblical scholarship. Invariably it is observed that scholars in the Bible have talked for decades if not centuries (if one takes Spinoza as a pioneer) about the very same controversial issues that prove such a surprise and offence to people. The chief complaint is therefore that of being kept in the dark. The protest is directed against clergy and a hierarchical church leadership who have patronised lay people by filtering the text and censoring its God, in order to protect them from its complex realities. God’s ultimate mystery has been acknowledged, but as a mystery to be kept apart from those ‘not in the know’, with a special package of God set aside to be known by ordinary people and handed to them week by week. This is gnosticism by another name, namely, orthodox, mainstream Christianity. And, as noted in the previous section, it usually has other purposes besides knowledge of God. The primary goal seems to be order and control.

For the exercise of protection may be far from benign, as it wields considerable power over people’s image of God, and potentially, therefore, presents the disquieting prospect of control of people’s lives and thinking. An orderly God, involved in “structure legitimation”,<sup>142</sup> is important in situations of distress or chaos: the God who comforts the afflicted and offers the hope of order out of chaos is part of the fullness of God. But, in particular when the situation has plenty of order and comfort such a God can be used to shore up the settled establishment and its management structures and to require the adherence of an orderly people. Sometimes God afflicts the comfortable.<sup>143</sup> But again a caution: a ‘disorderly’, unsettled and unsettling God can also be used to control, to “keep people on edge, always looking over their shoulders wondering what God is going to do next if they do not toe the mark.”<sup>144</sup> This simply goes to show that any claim to possess knowledge about God and about how God relates to humans is a containment of God, even if it purports to be about a God who will not be contained. Fretheim makes an important point in recognising that Brueggemann’s God may be appealed to in this way. Brueggemann’s God, with “a profound disjunction at the core of [God]’s life”,<sup>145</sup> may be just the trick to install a “hardened sort”<sup>146</sup> of sovereignty by which God and his henchmen rule supreme. But I am not sure this is how Brueggemann reads his God “in,

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<sup>142</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 47.

<sup>143</sup> From a prayer written for the Christian Conference of Asia.

<sup>144</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “Some Reflections on Brueggemann’s God”, in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 1998, 34.

<sup>145</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 268.

<sup>146</sup> Fretheim, *ibid.*

with, and under the text itself.”<sup>147</sup> I sense that Fretheim’s interpretation, and the use of “an unsettled God” to “keep the troops in line,”<sup>148</sup> is not a necessary upshot of recognising that God is ambiguous. There is indeed a risk that this is how it will be interpreted, which is itself a demonstration of the slipperiness of the slope between dialectic and polemic. It suggests how important it is to be alert to the entry of polemic into one’s own argument and, when it is spotted, focus on the other side to re-establish the dialectical dynamic and start crawling back up. In this case the slide is from a dynamic ambiguity in the mystery of God’s being to a static wilfulness in the character of God. An infinitely interacting and responding ‘Other’ of life-experience is reduced to a singular substance known only by its unknowability and feared accordingly.

But is such a God the God of the Old Testament witness, be it from core testimony, countertestimony or hidden testimony? Is not the essential point that the testimony itself is multiple and conflicting and therefore the conflicted God is never pinned down in any categorical way? This means that if we are using a set understanding of God to make a theological point, benign or otherwise, it will not be the whole biblical God that we are talking about. It will only be a partial view or a passing snapshot. Exploring the ‘character’ of God or noticing the multiplicity within the biblical witness in terms of God’s character is like viewing these snapshots. It need not entail reducing God to a character because it does not entail identifying God with a single snapshot. The word ‘character’ in relation to God is best accompanied by the prefix ‘multi’. It is a multi-character God we encounter in the texts of both the Old and New Testaments, which is to be a warning against any characterisations of God in finite form, any determination that God is ‘like this’ as opposed to ‘like that’. For to determine what God is is also at once to determine what God is not and this means introducing negativity and limitation into the nature of God. In metaphysical terms God remains essentially indeterminate, because God, as the source and goal of all longing and the aspiration of all living, is the sheer energy of being. This dynamic reality of God means that God cannot be adequately described as this character or that character. Biblical narratives speak of a God with character but they speak in such diverse ways that no one character-type can take hold. Biblical texts present multiple snapshots of the dynamism of God at work in the world, and Genesis 4 is a prime example of this. But again a snapshot is merely a ‘freeze-

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<sup>147</sup> Brueggemann, *op.cit.*, 19

<sup>148</sup> Fretheim, *ibid.*

frame': it can only convey one captured moment in God's history, a history that is unbounded and unceasing.

The Bible points to a God so big that we cannot comprehend it and we definitely cannot contain it in doctrine composed of human words. But this complexity is in fact its own advantage: within the multiple and diverse images and texts of the Bible there are clues for speaking about God in ways that can help us stay true to God's sacred, uncontained and 'Godly' being. There are numerous possibilities to choose from, different options with which to converse together about the life-giving, hope-building, spirit-restoring core of existence that is regularly called God, without destabilising God's vitality as essentially a matter of relationship, namely the relationships of people with the dynamic, living reality of their God. The Bible is composed of words and inescapably human in their limited ability to refer to reality. But the Bible contains words aplenty, conveying a rich mix of stories, testimonies, visions and images. And there is one image in the Old Testament that offers a particularly hopeful point of entry for conversation about a multiplex god within 21<sup>st</sup> century church. The image is of *God the nomad*. This image and its ongoing narrative stream may well have been launched in the principal text of this study – Genesis 4 – although it is possible to trace it back to Genesis 3 where we see God indeed driving Adam and Eve out of the garden, but going out with them to be with them in their search for life and livelihood.<sup>149</sup> Whatever its beginning, God the nomad journeys through the Bible text. This is a God who journeys with people and conceivably throughout all the earth.

God the nomad is well known in the Bible, to its people and its readers. For example, within the texts that sit between Egypt and Canaan, when Israel is finding its way from slavery to new life, we find God presented as journeying in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. There is also a particular stream of understanding within these texts that carried beyond the journey and into the new land, which sees God as one whose house is a tent so that God can travel and set up camp wherever the people do. Later God reasserts this commitment and ability to travel. God surprises the exiles in Babylon by being present with them in that foreign land and working through a foreigner, Cyrus, to ensure their return. On a

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<sup>149</sup> For this reason I really enjoyed this "rib rickler" that came through on the Rumors e-mail newsletter: *A teacher asked her students to draw a picture of their favourite Old Testament story. As she moved around the class, she came across Johnny who had drawn a bearded man driving an old car. In the back seat were a scantily clad man and woman. "It's a lovely picture," said the teacher, "but which story does it tell?" "That's when God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden."* (From Ralph Milton's RUMORS, a free Internet "e-zine" for active Christians with a sense of humour. To subscribe, send an e-mail to: rumors-subscribe@joinhands.com. Don't put anything else in that e-mail.)

wider sociological scene, the story of Cain and Abel brings to attention the ancient issue of which life is best, the settled agricultural life or nomadic following the flocks. Dominant traditions within the Old Testament push for possession of a land that the people can call home. Boundaries are drawn and covenant conditions laid down in terms of which the people can dwell in the land by right and be assured they can continue to do so as long as they keep their side of the covenant. But the nomad strand of tradition is not erased entirely, although it can be so well bracketed by settled life that it appears to be devalued. This seems to be the effect in the texts positioned between Egypt and Canaan, with the retrospective view of the wilderness wandering, offered by the final form of the text, indicating that this time was valuable as a time of preparation and repentance. In memory, it was also valued as the time when the people's desire for home was pure and they could feel God's wholehearted support. But, in the long run, it is only of interim value because it is just a transitional phase.<sup>150</sup>

Could narrative tales of God the nomad be our opening to bring into church a much bigger God than we have been proclaiming up to this point? Could it enable us to relate to the God-concept proposed in this study – complex and multiform? Could it help us to move about within the diversity of God to form our own kind of journeying relationship with a God who has not yet settled down to rest? For it is possible to speak together of a God who sojourns among us and among a multitude of other peoples in different places. Such speech about a God who is with different peoples in different places, and the experiences such speech alludes to, can be intensely personal yet it is never the exclusive possession of the ones who speak it. The God-stories of different peoples in different places are stories for the telling and sharing. Furthermore, for those of us who are Christian, it is not just possible, but entirely faithful to the Christian story to speak together of God *pitching a tent*. This is a God who “moves into the neighborhood”<sup>151</sup> in the shape and flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. This God is in the shape of Christ who continues the sojourning, by dwelling in and giving Christ-shape to a proliferation of finite forms and calling each and every place *home* for a time.

At this point in history could God the nomad be a constructive clue to expanding our horizons on who God can be, and will be, within the ambiguities of human existence? There is no resting place indeed for a God on the move, no permanent resting place anyway. There is no ceasing for a life-source with infinite possibilities yet to let loose; possibilities that proliferate

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<sup>150</sup> Cf. Schwartz, *op.cit.*, 51-52, 142.

<sup>151</sup> John 1:14 with paraphrase by Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language*, Navpress, Colorado: 1993, 217.

into inevitable tensions; tensions that cry out for negotiation; negotiations that broker resolution; resolutions that break down in disruption; disruptions that trigger a new route for nomad people.