

Genesis 4

Genesis 4 continues tracing humanity's descent from our place in the Garden as the watchmen of Creation, to being expelled, and now to the wickedness we showed ourselves capable of in Cain's murder of his brother Abel. This descent ends with the Flood in ch. 6, which is followed by the first major covenant in scripture.

Similar to the play on words in ch. 2 where the human (*'ādām*) comes from the ground (*'ādāmāh*), verse 1 says that Eve gave birth to Cain (*qayin*), and she then says, "I've created (*qānīti*) a man with Yahweh." The language is meant to have a lyrical quality, which gives the narrative an epic, poetic dimension.

Eve and Women

We've historically read Genesis as supporting the subjugation of women in history, but a close reading challenges this assumption. The language in the Hebrew of Genesis 2 suggests that the serpent was speaking to both Adam and Eve when giving his temptation, and God punishes Adam for cowardly pretending he had little say in the matter. Here in ch. 4, Eve is the first person in scripture to pronounce the sacred name of Yahweh. This is significant when considering how much meaning the Hebrews invested in that name and how closely they guarded it. Not only is Eve of a status to use Yahweh's name, but the act of creating her son Cain--which she does with Yahweh's collaboration--is implied to be the closest humans reach to being like God, who is fundamentally a creative being.

Cain and Abel: Curious Omissions and Inclusions of Detail

Since the language of the opening chapters is so sparse and economical, it's important to consider what is mentioned and what is not. In the story of Cain's and Abel's offerings to God, and later Abel's murder, it's unusual that some of the main motivations for the story's actions are not mentioned. First, it is not mentioned why God preferred Abel's offering over Cain's. We can speculate, as Sunday school classes tend to do, that Cain did not "give his best", but there's no evidence from the story that his heart wasn't in it. Why does Genesis omit explanation of such a crucial detail which seems to be the pivot point of the entire story? Similarly, scripture does not mention exactly why Cain murders Abel. Was simple envy enough to drive Cain to murder? Was he hoping to accomplish something? Scripture's silence is revealing. Ultimately, motivations and psychological realities play a background role in much of the Old Testament; what is important is the naked *fact* of the events themselves. We don't know why God preferred Abel's offering over Cain's. It must not have been as important to the narrative as it was in Cain's mind.

The detail of Abel's murder as "in the field" is telling. The fact that the murder occurred in plain sight makes the murder all the more naked. It is startling the evil we quickly showed ourselves capable of in the opening pages of our story, when our existence was free from many laws and moral strictures. The rest of scripture can be read as God's attempt to give us adequate

parameters to contain and guide our nature, which is bears the potential for both Godlikeness and for wanton brutality.

Source: Richard Elliott Friedman. *Commentary on the Torah*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.