

PARALLEL GUIDE 5

Cain and Abel

Summary: Immediately after humanity's expulsion from Eden, sin proliferates. This chapter continues the verse by verse approach, this time with the Cain and Abel story. Then it reviews the subsequent series of literary fragments that show sin pervading all creation. It ends by discussing the transcendence and immanence of God.

Learning Objectives

- Read Genesis 4:1-16 and 4:17-6:4
- Explain the meaning of the story of Cain and Abel
- Tell why Enoch and Elijah became messianic figures
- Understand the main point about God's grace in relationship to human righteousness
- Understand why Greek philosophy tends to speak of God as "without passions" and why this poses a problem for Christian theology

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. In Hebrew poetry, "each verse consists of two statements, the second parallel to the first. The second half of the verse may repeat the same thought as the first half . . . or it may be some other kind of parallel thought." Psalm 8:3-4 is an example. Write a four-verse poem about your understanding of the Cain and Abel story. Use the Hebrew poetic form described above.
2. Read Genesis 4:8-16 several times. Check the passage in other translations and look up the passage in a commentary. What did the passage mean to the author and what do scholars say about it? How does it fit in the context of the entire Book of Genesis?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Scripture can evoke memories. Notice what memories came to you as you were reading the chapter on Cain and Abel. Add them to the "Autobiography" section of your notebook. Decide how you might share your reaction to the chapter with the members of your group.

Where do you see rivalry between siblings or competition between groups coveting the same land or the same promise? Identify places in our culture that parallel the Cain and Abel story.

Chapter 5

CAIN AND ABEL

The story of Cain and Abel shows sin, first described as a rebellion against God, immediately becoming the destruction of a fellow human being. The story itself is tied together with other fragments of tradition in a rather confusing way. The J writer has an overall intention: to show the spread of sin until the whole creation

becomes infected with it. J puts together the sources more or less as they stood, not editing them into a smooth story which hangs together at all points. We see attached to the main account a second short account of Cain and a genealogy of his descendants which seems to have an etiological purpose, but we find tucked away in it a fragment of an ancient song which serves J's purpose of showing the deepening of sin.

Read Genesis 4:1-16

These first two verses set the stage for the story. Cain and Abel are born, and it is noted that Abel is a shepherd and Cain a farmer. The etymology (sources of words or meanings of words) of the name "Cain" is typical of J's style. We find again and again the name of a person or place "explained," though the explanation frequently does not appear to be strictly accurate. In this case, the name "Cain," which means "spear" in Hebrew, is explained by a play on words: "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." "Cain" (Hebrew, qayin) sounds something like the verb "to get" (Hebrew, qanah). The meaning of the name "Abel," if it has any meaning, is not known, but it does sound like the Hebrew word for "futility," and, as it turns out, Abel's life is futile.

The Main Story

Cain is a farmer, one who tills the ground and plants crops, and Abel is a shepherd. This draws attention to the conflict between the ways of life of the settled farmer and the nomadic shepherd. Shepherds had to be always on the move (which is what "nomad" means: one who moves about, usually living in tents, rather than settling down in one spot and building a permanent dwelling). This was because grazing land was rather scarce in the ancient Near East, and sheep eat the grass down to the roots. Shepherds could stay in one spot until the sheep had eaten all the grass; then they had to move on to another site. Farmers did not like to have shepherds come to their area because sheep ruined the pasture land for cattle, and also because the way of life of the shepherd was different from that of the settled community.

Genesis 4:1-2

Contests for the land between these two groups were frequent and often bloody. Sometimes a peaceable arrangement was made by which the nomads bought grazing rights so that they could graze their sheep on the stubble that was left in the field after the harvest. Sometimes a settled culture would encourage nomads to come into the area to form a buffer zone between them and hostile neighbors. (This is apparently what happened in the case of the Hebrew tribes who were allowed to graze their flocks in the land of Goshen, east of the main Egyptian centers along the Nile. We read about this in the last section of Genesis, the story of Joseph.) Usually, however, such peaceful means were not found, and there was a conflict between the two groups.

Genesis 4:3-7

The "offerings" which Cain and Abel make are obviously sacrifices. This means that by this time—that is, the time of the writer—people were relating to God by means of cultic activities. There was no cult—that is, no formal "religious" activity by means of which human beings and God are brought into relationship—in the garden. God walked in the garden and spoke directly to the man and the woman. The J writer does not explain how cultic worship began—this story is not about that issue. Its purpose is not to give a detailed history of human activity, putting in every point that would be required; instead, it tells us about the spread of sin. J shows in this story, for example, how sin moves from a human overreaching of the status of creature in an attempt to rival God, to the killing of one's brother even in a religious setting. The farmer, Cain, offers some of his crop to YHWH; Abel offers YHWH the meat and fat (the fat was supposed to be especially desirable to God!) of the firstborn of his flock. By the time the J writer was telling this story, Israelite worship had long included both types of sacrifice—the "cereal offering" and the "meat offering." (The Hebrews, who had been shepherding nomads, had settled in Canaan and had blended their culture with the agricultural ways of life on the land.) The words used to describe the two offerings are the same ones which

appear in later legislation. That is, Cain offers what a farmer is supposed to offer; Abel brings what a shepherd is supposed to bring.

Our trouble begins in the second half of verse 4. Most translations say that the Lord “accepted” or “looked with favor” on Abel’s sacrifice but not at Cain’s. The verb, however, is a generic “do” or “make.” All we can say for sure is that God’s reaction to Abel’s offering—whatever that reaction was—was opposite to the reaction to Cain’s sacrifice. The point J is making has nothing to do with the offerings themselves, nor with the manner in which each came before God. The point is that sometimes we neither know nor understand why things happen. Cain is angry and his face falls. This is clear enough. But YHWH’s words to Cain—translated in the English as “. . . if you do well, will you not be accepted?”—literally reads either “. . . if you do well, will you not be able to lift up?” or “. . . if you do well, you are able to lift up.” What does this mean?

Verse 7 uses a vivid figure of speech. “Sin is lurking at the door”—“to couch” is to lie in ambush, to lurk. The imagery is of an animal waiting to pounce on its victim. “Its desire is for you, but you must master it”—sin is waiting to pounce on you, but you are able to overcome it. (One is reminded of I Peter 5:8—“Like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.”) God is warning Cain that in this moment of anger, of indignation, and of jealousy, he is susceptible to sin. Cain must be as aware of sin as he would be aware of danger from a wild animal.

The Hebrew of verse 8 reads, “Cain said to Abel his brother, and when they were in the field. . . .” This is obviously not correct. The King James Bible has it, “And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field” The Septuagint is probably closer to what was originally written when it corrects the text to read, “Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’ And when they were in the field. . . .” (This is the translation used in the NRSV.)

Cain, you remember, was a farmer. When he takes Abel out to the field, he is taking him to the site of Cain’s work which he has offered to God. This is the horror of the story which J undoubtedly wants us to understand: Cain is about to kill his brother “at the altar”—on the site of Cain’s sacrifice to YHWH! This is not merely a disagreement between rival brothers, but a religious battle.

Genesis 4:8-16

There are many theories about what all this means. One is that the story was once told at a particular sanctuary to explain why human sacrifice was no longer practiced there. There is no doubt that human sacrifice was performed within the cultus of Canaanite religion, though how widespread it was, we cannot tell. It was certainly carried out at a fairly late period in the Phoenician cult of Moloch. Another theory is that this story accompanied a ritual fertility dance. “Abel” was the name given to the scapegoat, a goat on which the sins (ritual sins, cultic “pollution”) were laid, after which it was either physically or symbolically killed. In this way the sin of the people would be destroyed and the land made pure so that it could be fertile in the coming year.

It is exceedingly difficult to demonstrate such theories. There are times when we can assume that such pre-Israelite settings for some of the Bible stories are possible, perhaps even likely. But the evidence for either of these particular theories is not very convincing. More important than this, however, is the question of what use should be made of such theories, even if they are clearly demonstrated. Meanings which a story, a hymn, or a cultic practice may have held for people in earlier ages can be important for a number of reasons: historical, anthropological, sociological, etc. Unless the writer was aware of these earlier uses and intends them to apply in the version of the story the writer tells, they are not relevant to the interpretation of the text. The biblical interpreter, the person who is trying to interpret what the story in the Bible is saying, must deal as far as is possible with the question of what it meant at the time and in the setting in which it was written. We have already drawn attention to the fact that we should not read later meanings back into the intentions of the Old Testament writers: the prophets could not have meant to predict Jesus, for example, because they were addressing issues other than even that of the Messiah, and Jesus had not yet lived. This is an extension

of that principle, to say that we should not suppose that a writer intends an earlier meaning of a story unless the writer makes it clear in his own telling of the story that such meaning is intended.

Adam and Eve had sinned against God by asserting their human freedom in a way that challenged God's lordship. Cain's act of murder is also seen by J as a sin against God, but on a deeper and more terrible level. Earlier we drew attention to the question God asked Adam: "Where are you?" The question asked where Adam stood in relation to God. Adam's answer spoke of his fear and shame. Now, the same form of words is used when God asks Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain is being asked where he stands in relation to his brother. This dialogue involves God, Cain, and Abel, and it takes place on the site of Cain's murder of his brother. These passages, the one from the story of Adam and the other in the story of Cain, indicate two dimensions of "religion": the direct relationship between human being and God, sometimes referred to as the "vertical" relationship, and the equally religious relationship of human being to fellow human being under God, the "horizontal" relationship. J is clearly not thinking of the horizontal relationship as only human being to human being in a "secular" sense which leaves God out of the picture. The horizontal relationship involves humankind's community responsibility—no man or woman lives alone. Husband and wife or brother and brother, sister and sister or parent and child, these are among the communities in which God has placed human beings; they represent what some theologians have called "orders of creation," meaning aspects of human life which are due to God's design of creation. When Cain answers God's question, he denies any responsibility: "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" In this answer Cain is impertinent in his defiance of God; and he denies his community responsibility. All of this takes place in the context of Cain's religious act of sacrifice! Perhaps the J writer expects us to see the horror of this and to recognize it not simply as a crime of murder, but as a sin—a religious offense. We need to remember that the ancient Hebrews made no distinction between "religious" and "secular" parts of life, as if God were concerned only with matters of cult. What is the correct answer to Cain's question? It is often assumed to be "Yes, you are your brother's keeper." But that is not quite right. To be a keeper is better, assuredly, than to be a murderer. Better still is to be a brother's brother (or sister). The fractured family life exemplified by Cain and Abel continues throughout the narratives of Genesis.

As Abel's blood cries out from the ground, the religious horror of the story is emphasized. For the Hebrew, blood is life. Life is given by God alone and is especially closely connected with God because God has breathed the "breath of life" into us. This life cries out to God. Cain has dared to snatch from God the right to determine life. Remember that although humankind was given dominion over creation, it was not to take the life of an animal even for food—humans were to eat grass and herbs, but not meat. Now one man has taken another human life from God. Later, at the end of the Noah story, we see how humankind—in community—is authorized to act as God's representative in taking life as punishment when murder has been committed—a life for a life. Here Cain is not acting as God's representative, but as his substitute.

In the flow of these stories J is showing us sin "cascading" into the world and becoming more intense. Sin began with disobedience; in this story it has increased to fratricide (the killing of a brother). As the J narrative continues, we see sin expand still further. Finally the P writer introduces the word "violence" to show the destructive effect of sin on God's creation. Human actions against one another are never seen simply as crimes. They are attacks on God's lordship and destruction of his

So there are at least three points which J makes in this story:

- a) the increase in the intensity of sin;
- b) Cain's snatching of God's right to determine life; and
- c) community responsibility as an "order of creation," the denial of which results in disruption of creation.

The judgment for this sin comes immediately and is closely related to the sin itself. For burying the life (blood) of his brother in the ground (remember that 'adamah and 'adam, "earth" or "ground" and "Man"—in

the sense of “humankind”—are closely related both as words and in reality), the curse upon the ground is made more intense than it was in the case of Adam. “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.” Cain the farmer, already forced to till the ground “in the sweat of his face,” is now to do so with no reward. Furthermore, since he has denied community responsibility, he is now cut off from human community. He will be “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

When Cain protests that he cannot bear this punishment, he includes another judgment which God had not stated. “Today you have driven me away from the soil; and I shall be hidden from your face; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. . . .” From the time when Adam was expelled from the garden there was always the possibility that humankind might lose its relationship with God. The necessity for the development of cultic religion shows that the direct relationship with God that existed in the garden was gone. Now Cain believes that possibility has become fact for him—he has been sent away from the presence of God completely.

When Cain speaks of the judgment that he be a wanderer, alone, with no community, he says, “. . . anyone who meets me will kill me.” In times before police forces protected citizens from one another, individuals were protected by what was called “the law of blood revenge.” Everyone was a member of some tribe, and there was usually some kind of sign that told which tribe one belonged to. Often this was a tattoo, the mark of the tribe. If one were alone on the desert and a group of strangers approached, the size and strength of the tribe one belonged to determined the individual’s safety. If a member of one tribe took the life of a person from another tribe, that tribe would take revenge. To be alone without a tribal mark would be the same as a death warrant.

God gives Cain a mark for his protection. What is in mind here may well be a facial tattoo of a type later characteristic among the Kenites, the “descendants” of Cain. The “mark of Cain” is a sign of God’s protection—not, as popular legend has it, a sign of disgrace. It is a sign of God’s grace. Just as God clothes Adam and Eve as he sends them from the Garden, so God “clothes” Cain as he sends him to wander. God’s punishment—as depicted in this section of Genesis—is always softened by grace.

In keeping with the law of blood revenge, God promises that the vengeance taken for Cain, should he be killed, will be seven times the offense. In later times the law

of blood revenge was softened by the rule which prescribed “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” That is, only one eye for one eye, one tooth for one tooth—the revenge must be no greater than the offense. Those who remember Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount in which he recites this rule and then goes on to say “resist not evil” often get the impression that what he was opposing was the harsh, cruel “law of the jungle.” In fact, the rule he cites was at the time the furthest advance of justice—let the punishment fit the crime.

Cain goes to the land of Nod. “Nod” means “wandering” or “restlessness.” Verse 16 also says that he “went away from the presence of the LORD.” This probably reflects something of the situation at the time of the J writer. The Kenites were a people who, living on or near the borders of Israel, never really became a part of Israel. They lived on the desert’s edge, moving about as workers in metal, never marrying outside their own group. The Kenites were, according to the traditions of both Israel and themselves, the descendants of Cain. When we study the Book of Exodus, we see that they joined with the group of Hebrews who came out of Egypt and probably participated with them in the conquest of the land of Canaan. We also see that they were perhaps the ones who passed on the name “YHWH” to Moses as the name of the god they worshiped.

The Kenites were something of a puzzle to Israel. They knew the God YHWH, but they were not part of the “people of God,” the people of Israel. They were wanderers, rather like present-day gypsies; they were cut off from the land, living on it but not really settling it. So this story of Cain going “away from the presence of the LORD” (YHWH) and living in the land of “wandering” (Nod) may show something of Israel’s understanding of the Kenites.

This ends the story of Cain and Abel. The remainder of chapter 4 treats the person of Cain in an entirely different way. The story in these first sixteen verses is an account of the intensification of sin. We are supposed to feel the horror of what has happened to God's creation, to humanity in its relations with God, and to the earth itself as a human being uses it to cover over the spilling of blood. At all points it is a religious offense that Cain has committed, most evil when it spoils God's good creation.

The Fragments

Genesis 4:17-6:4

The Kenites, the "Song of Lamech," the P Genealogy, and "the Sons of God"—these fragments are put together in a way that is very confusing if you are looking for a single, closely reasoned story plot. On the surface, it seems that the editor has simply taken another Cain tradition, added a little story to get another line of descent from Adam and Eve, tacked on the rest of the P account which brings P's narrative from the creation story to Noah, and then—for some strange reason—added a story about divine beings mating with human women. When we remember the fact that the editing was rather loosely done, retaining repetitions from one source to another, we can accept that this has happened here. Beneath the appearance of looseness, the J writer's main purpose—to show the deepening and spreading of sin—runs clearly through this section. We trace this underlying purpose as we look at these fragments.

This fragment about Cain is completely separate from the story we have just considered. Cain is the ancestor of city-dwellers. The building of a city is an important landmark in the development of human culture. "Civilization" means life in a city (Latin, *civitas*). Putting aside for the moment the preceding story of Cain and Abel, in which Cain was a farmer and Abel a shepherd, this little fragment has Cain build a city and name it after his son Enoch. Then Enoch's descendant, Lamech, has three sons. These sons are "the father of those who dwell in tents and have cattle," "the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe," and "the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron." Here are three of the occupations that show the advance of human culture: shepherds, musicians, and blacksmiths. This is an etiological story, but it probably reflects also some ancient memories of the origins of city life. When we get to the story of Noah, we shall say more about the "cradle of civilization," the city-states of the Tigris-Euphrates basin. This fragment probably preserves some form of memory of this ancient civilization to the east of Canaan. (The land of Nod was "east of Eden," Gen. 4:16.) Connecting Cain with this ancient memory shows the Kenites as the founders of civilization. This, of course, does not agree at all with the view of the Kenites as gypsy-like nomads, but their skills in metalworking appear in this fragment in the person of Tubal-cain. It appears impossible to bring together the picture of the Kenites as nomads with them as city-builders on the basis of this story.

Genesis 4:17-24

The underlying purpose of the J writer in telling the story can probably be seen, not in these etiological details, but in what occurs in verses 23 and 24. Almost hidden among the etiological stories is this very ancient poetic fragment, "The Song of Lamech":

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.

While we have this poem in front of us, let us notice one feature of Hebrew poetry: each verse consists of two statements, the second parallel to the first. The second half of the verse may repeat the same thought as the first half, as in the first two verses of this psalm. Or it may be some other kind of parallel thought: in verse three of this psalm, vengeance is the motif which is paralleled in each half, but in the second half the vengeance is greatly increased.

This poem was probably originally a song of boasting, preserved in a tradition about Cain and his

descendants. J's purpose in having it here—and possibly the reason for including this entire Cain-Kenite section is to lead up to this psalm—is to show the increase in sin. Blood revenge has run amuck! Lamech has killed a young man for merely hitting him. Then he boasts that the vengeance that God promised his ancestor Cain is not enough for him. Sevenfold is increased to seventy-sevenfold! So human society, even though it builds cities and advances in the skills and artistry of civilization, has fallen apart at the level of human life. Even the crude form of justice, which the law of blood revenge represents, has become so totally distorted by boasting and self-centeredness that no security is possible except for the very strong. We have moved from disobedience in Adam and Eve, to fratricide in Cain, to the breakdown of any limits on revenge in Lamech. The writer has brought in a genealogy from Cain leading up to the children of Lamech. In verse 25 it is as though no such genealogy existed. Cain is banished and Abel is dead. Both are removed. So Adam and Eve have a son whom they name Seth, and a very small fragment of a J genealogy from Seth is begun; then chapter 5, from the P writer, traces the human descent from Adam through Seth. These represent two different traditions which the compiler keeps, with no attempt to remove the contradictions. Enoch and Lamech appear in both genealogies. In verse 26, Enosh (not Enoch) is the son of Seth, and “at that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD” (YHWH). There has been a considerable amount of discussion about what that means. It is known that “YHWH” or “Yah” was a commonly used name for a god throughout the area of the ancient Near East. The name did not originally have the significance that it was to gain in the context of the covenant with Israel; before the covenant at Sinai it was simply a name for one god among many. Is the J writer saying here that YHWH, the God who was eventually to be the God of Israel, was the God of humankind in general in the time of “primeval history”—the shadowy days of ancient memory before the accurate historical memory of Israel emerged? In the unfolding of the Genesis story, worship of YHWH is gradually narrowed down to Israel; but YHWH is God, lord from the beginning, worshiped even from early times, as early as those of Adam's grandson. This is why the J writer uses the name YHWH for God from the beginning. In the other tradition, which E and P follow, this name was not given until Moses' meeting with God at the burning bush. Both traditions, in spite of this difference concerning the use of the name, agree that it is the same God who was from the beginning, and both agree that the special relationship between this God and humankind was narrowed to Israel from an earlier time when all humankind worshiped God. The narrowing was due to the increase in sin and the consequent alienation of most of humankind from God.

Genesis 5:1-32

We noted in Chapter Three that the P story goes from the account of creation in Gen. 1:1-24 over to chapter 5, which brings the story of creation to Noah. We do not examine this genealogy in chapter 5 in any detail. The amazingly long lives of the people follow a rough pattern: people from Adam to Noah live longest; lives are somewhat shorter for those prior to Abraham, and shorter still for the patriarchs, until finally people live the usual seventy years.

The only persons in the list we note are Enoch (mentioned in verses 18-24), Lamech, and Noah. Enoch and Lamech are listed in both the Cain genealogy of 4:17-22 and in this Seth genealogy; this indicates some connection between the two traditions. Enoch “walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him” (5:24). No one really knows what this text means. In the P version of the flood story we are told that Noah “walked with God,” apparently meaning that Noah was righteous. After the age of Noah, no mention is made of anyone “walking with God,” although the prophet Micah contrasts the empty sacrifices of a faithless people with the requirements of true faith: “He told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Abraham is described as walking before God. Is the intention in the cases of Enoch and Noah to show an unusual relationship between God and them? If so, nothing more is made of it in Enoch's case, unless the next few words indicate it: “and he was no more, because God took him.”

The words here are not difficult to translate, but the sentence is so brief, with no further development, that it is difficult to know what the writer is saying. Later ages interpreted this as meaning something like what happened to Elijah, the prophet. Elijah, after dropping his mantle to Elisha, went directly up to heaven in a

whirlwind, hidden from sight by the chariot and horses of fire. Elijah did not die, was not buried; he was “translated” directly to the dwelling place of God. By this interpretation, which may be reading too much into the text of Gen. 5:24, both Enoch and Elijah came to be seen as figures who would take part in the future age in which God would send the Messiah to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. Both of them were in the presence of God, ready to be sent out as messengers. To this day, at least in Orthodox Jewish custom, a cup of wine is poured for Elijah at the celebration of the Passover, and the door of the house is left open, for at any moment—perhaps this year at the Passover!—God may send Elijah to announce the Messiah.

In the New Testament the first three gospels (called the “synoptic” gospels because they give essentially the same summary of the Christian story of Jesus) allude to the expectation of the coming of Elijah and obviously tie the appearance of John the Baptist to him. All of this is later interpretation, however, and so should not be read back into this writer’s meaning. We simply do not know what P or the sources used by P meant by this little saying about Enoch and God. Finally the P genealogy reaches its main point with the birth of Noah. He is to be the main figure in the story of the Flood in chapters 6-9. The name “Noah” means “rest.” The meaning of the name is intentional as the writer shows, deriving it from the promise that Noah shall “bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands” (5:29). P also puns on the meaning of the name by speaking of the ark “resting” on the top of the mountains (8:4). Does the reference to cursed ground and the relief that Noah was to bring from toil (5:29) mean that Noah is going to reseed the earth with the life that was preserved on the ark? Or—also possible—does it point to the fact that Noah was the first keeper of vineyards (9:20-21), from which comes wine and, thereby, rest and relief from work and toil?

These four verses are a strange little fragment, not connected with what comes before or what follows. The “sons of God” are the sons of the ‘elohim. It seems that the Hebrews were caught in the contradiction of believing fervently that YHWH alone is God and yet having a tradition of lesser gods. They never resolved this contradiction, but then it did not seem to be a problem for them.

Genesis 6:1-4

This little story is not directly connected with the flood story which follows it, but the J writer reinforces an important point with it: sin is spreading. Now the divine element enters into the disorderedness of the created order. The ‘elohim and “the daughters of men” have produced a mixed race; the distinction in the universe between humankind, created in the image of God but still “of the earth,” and the heavenly court which was not part of the created order, is blurred. The Nephilim, the giants, in the original story were probably the offspring of this union. Ancient mythology has many stories of gods and women producing “heroes,” the giants or Titans who are neither quite human nor quite gods.

The J writer does not use this story to account for such divine-human heroes. Instead, judgment is pronounced on all, not just the offspring of the sons of the ‘elohim and the women. The human life-span is reduced to 120 years—still a goodly span which will be reduced even further later, but shorter than it was before. Corruption is practically complete, reaching even beyond creation. The disobedience has progressed through fratricide, the breakdown of human restraints on the taking of life, to the corruption of the heavenly court itself.

Genesis 6:5-8

You may be thinking that we have read too much into these little stories. It is true that, taken by themselves, some of the stories, especially the short fragments, could not bear the amount of interpretation we have suggested. The J writer’s pattern, however, is not shown in any one story but in the whole sequence. In these verses J interprets; these are the writer’s own words. Up to now, J has been using material from the different traditions that had developed by this time, arranging them and editing them to suit his purposes. These verses are a programmatic comment, a passage from J explaining that writer’s intentions.

The summary of all that is compiled here is that “the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and

that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (6:5). The “thoughts of the heart” means something more far-reaching in Hebrew than the English words would suggest. For the Hebrew, the heart is not the center of the emotions but of the mind and the will. The “thoughts” of the heart do not simply include thinking but also willing and doing. So, if the thoughts of the heart are evil, this means that a person’s whole inner life is evil: feelings, thoughts, and deliberate actions are all evil. Note also that this is said with almost unnecessary emphasis: the thoughts of the heart are only evil continually. The picture shows that human beings are entirely evil and that they delight in it.

This brief programmatic statement sets the stage for the flood story, which we examine in the next chapter. It also shows something about God as the Hebrews thought of God. It is a view which is present throughout the Old Testament and the New and is in direct contradiction with another way of thinking about God that has come into the Christian tradition from Greek philosophy. In the Bible, God has passions which are provoked by involvement with creation. YHWH is sorry for creating humankind; it “grieved him to his heart” (6:6). The picture of God which the Greek philosophers give us is the opposite of this: God is not affected by the world, God is without passions. (Look, for example, in the back of The Book of Common Prayer at the “Articles of Religion,” Article I. It says that God is “without body, parts, or passions.”)

From the Greek point of view, especially that of Aristotle which strongly influenced later Christian theology, God is the opposite of the finite world. The finite world is the world of becoming, and God is being itself; the finite world is in motion, because motion is what happens when some potentiality (something that is possible but has not yet become actual) is becoming actual; but God is pure actuality with no potentiality that has not actualized; God is the cause of all, but has no cause; God moves all things (which means God causes them to change from potentiality to actuality) simply by the attractiveness of God own being—God is not even aware of finitude; although God moves all things (which are therefore passive in relation to his God’s), God is moved by nothing (God is not passive in relation to an outside activity). All this means that God is impassive—God suffers (meaning “endures”) no passion (something done to God from outside God). God is passionless.

The point of this Greek view of God is not to portray a cold, impersonal God, though that may be the result. The point is to emphasize the transcendence of God. God is not the same as all the rest of the world of change and decay. If it were allowed that God should be moved by this world, it would be a negation of God.

The Hebrew picture of God also shows God’s transcendence. We noticed this as one of the meanings of God’s creating by a word. The Hebrew way of stating the transcendence of God is, however, different from the Greek. The Hebrew grounds awareness of the transcendence of God in the experience of the covenant, in which God is Lord. But the Hebrew is not reluctant to speak of God in terms of human passions. God is sorry, God’s heart is grieved, God repents, is angry and jealous, as well as loving, merciful, and long-suffering. Finally, Christians see in the crucifixion of Jesus the suffering of God in the most extreme degree.

The Greek view of the divine impassibility made it extremely difficult to express the Christian experience of Jesus as Lord in a sense beyond that of a human authority only. When Christians tried to say that Jesus is Lord the way YHWH is Lord, Greek gentiles faced the difficulty of having to say something that completely contradicted their basic point of view: that the Lord suffered.

The anthropomorphic language of J (speaking of God in human terms) expresses the nearness, or immanence, of God, but J is emphatic also that God is Lord, transcendent over all his creation. This tension is maintained throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. To resolve it does not mean necessarily to decide for either the one or the other. The Bible says both that God is “high and lifted up” and that God “grieves” over the people.

At any rate, J dares to read the thoughts and feelings of God and to see grief and sorrow there. God then decides to “blot out” all life in the world. The words “blot out” literally mean “wash away”; perhaps this

hints at the flood which is to follow. After this terrible decision, the element of grace inevitably appears: “But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD” (6:8). “Grace” means the “favor” of God, the good pleasure of God toward humankind. All through our studies we note a contrast between points of view which see humankind standing in the right with God because it has in some way earned this status, and those which see humankind in the right with God simply because God views humankind with pleasure—extends grace to it. Of course, God could show grace to a person because the person was actually righteous; or God could show him or her grace in spite of his or her being unrighteous. The latter is more remarkable and shows the graciousness of God’s extended good favor. Grace could come about in either case. The point is that God alone decides to whom favor is shown. Therefore, grace can never really be earned, as though God would have no choice in the matter.

Why Noah found favor with God, the author does not at this point tell us. The stage is now set for the story of the Flood.