

'ORIGINAL' SIN IN THE PRIMEVAL NARRATIVES

Dwight D Swanson

The task of this paper is the difficult one of attempting to shed light on a text which is well known to everyone. It is made further difficult by the massive literature on the subject. To begin with, therefore, it is necessary to establish the limits and focus of this study.

Dr Noble's *Prolegomena* to this conference has drawn attention to the vexed issue of the hermeneutical starting point. The 'original' sin is presumably that of the man and the woman in the garden, in Genesis 3. Therefore, this is the crux text for evaluating our development of a doctrine of sin of any kind, original or otherwise. For Christians, the key interpretative text for understanding Genesis 3, and thus the New Testament crux, is Romans 5:12-21. For some interpreters all that is needed is Paul—as Cardinal Ratzinger has recently noted,¹ even Paul is not so much concerned with the details of Genesis 3 as with the role of Adam in relation to the gift of life in Christ Jesus.

But, of course, Genesis 3 cannot be taken in isolation from its contexts. The key context which this paper will examine is the whole of what is called the 'Primeval Narrative'. Chapters 1-11 are a literary whole which takes the listener from the start of creation through to the expansion of humanity over all the face of the earth, and from the First Human (*ha'adam*) to the First Father of the Chosen People (*'abraham*). There can be no understanding of sin without hearing the whole of this story.

Again, that this Primeval Narrative is fashioned to focus attention on one man, Abraham, and the family which derives from his loins, draws us to consider the wider context of the people to whom the stories were told. The language, Hebrew—a minor subdivision of the family of Semitic languages—points to a people who were citizens of a client state on the edges of superpower empires. The integration of the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into the greater history of Israel draws the circle even narrower, to a period of perhaps 400 years—at the most—when this people were settled enough to engage in the enterprise of tracing origins, and fitting themselves into the greater scheme of history and empire. The end of the narrative, which sweeps from the chaos of the moment before creation to the chaos of destruction following the Babylonian conquest of Judah, and known as the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH), gives us an ostensible end-point (*terminus ad quem*) for placing the listeners. That is, about the mid-6th

¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *'In the Beginning...': A Catholic Understanding of the Creation and the Fall*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990ET), 71f, says this is true of Augustine.

century BC. But, the content of this history (or, prophecy, as the Hebrew Bible terms it) clearly contains material from the time of autonomous rule in Israel. The archives of the state are drawn on; the conflicts of the past are clearly recalled; the vocabulary shows relation to the writings of the prophets and wise men of those times.²

This setting requires the greater context of the OT scriptures to be taken into account. The question of the chronological priority of the various written materials is an open one. Because the Primeval Narrative relates stories of the beginnings of all things does not mean that it was written first! Rather, like all prefaces, it is more likely to be among the last to be placed in the form in which we hear it. Thus, as we hear these stories we are jumping into the midst of a conversation and not its beginning—nor, as the Second Temple Period shows, its end. This requires us to keep one ear tuned to the other voices which may be a part of this conversation. Those voices which remain available to us will be found in two main places:

One, within the OT literature itself. This may seem a mammoth task to incorporate into this study, but it is in fact not a difficult undertaking. Genesis 2-3 actually figures very little in the rest of the OT.³ It is not, for the OT, a *crux interpretum* regarding sin or its origins. The rest of the DtrH does not refer ‘back’ to this account; the only prophetic word which seems to speak to Genesis 2-3 appears to be Ezekiel 28, but the Man described there is very different from the Human we see in the Garden in Genesis. But we do find echoes of Genesis 2-3 in the Wisdom Literature—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. We shall trace these echoes at various points in our study. What is of importance to note at this point is that the key dialogue with Genesis 2-3 within OT scriptures is a *Wisdom discussion*. This seems to me to be the first voice to hear in the narrative.⁴

The fact that the Genesis story appears of little interest to the rest of the OT does not mean, however, that this does not remain a *crux* for us. Its canonical placement, and its opening statement, ‘In the beginning...’, give it a priority of place for our consideration. What this placement reminds us is that we must read

² So, it can be seen that this approach does not follow current loud voices suggesting a Persian or even Hellenistic origin for all the books of the Hebrew Bible (Thompson, Davies, et.al.).

³ As W Brueggemann points out, *Genesis* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching) (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 41.

⁴ This relationship has long been recognised. See especially L Alonso-Schöckel, ‘Sapiential and Covenant Themes in Genesis 2-3’, in J L Crenshaw (ed), *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (New York: KTAV, 1976), a translation of his 1962 article in Spanish. See also G E Mendenhall, ‘The Shady Side of Wisdom: The Date and Purpose of Genesis 3’, in H N Bream, et al, *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M Myers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 319-334, who sees the narrative as anti-wisdom; and J D Crossan, ‘Response to White: Felix Culpa and Foenix Culprit’, in Patte (ed), *Genesis 2-3: Kaleidoscopic Structural Readings* (Semeia 18; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), who sees the Man and Woman facing the same dilemma as Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes.

the account backwards *and* forwards, and backwards again (which this paper attempts to do), to grasp its importance for us as Christians.

The second voice is that of Ancient Near Eastern mythology (using that word purposely and specifically). The context of the Primeval Narrative is not just Israel, as an in-house and parochial exercise. The people of Israel lived under the shadow of their powerful neighbours at every stage of their history. Egypt and Mesopotamia are major influences. The Wisdom Tradition is linked to Egypt within the DtrH, in the description of Solomon's court. The Primeval Narrative itself traces the origins of the First Patriarch to Mesopotamia, and places him in Egypt as well; the stories all bear close resemblances to extant material from Sumer and Old Babylon, contemporary to the period in which we would expect to find Abraham in Ur, and extant in Babylon when the exiles from Judah arrive in the 6th century.

Therefore, we have to keep in mind that the prevalent world-view would be well known to the Wise Men and educated leaders of Israel. It would be as pervasive and insistent as that of any major cultural force through the centuries. The Hellenism of Alexander, the legal force of Rome, the 'fair play' of English colonialism, and the materialism of America, are later examples of the sort of influence that Mesopotamian mythological theism would have had on the small peoples of Canaan/Israel.

In drawing attention to this I am not saying that the Primeval Narrative is dependent on the Mesopotamian accounts, or merely a derived account. Rather, this is to remind us that these narratives come to us from a specific historical and cultural setting, in the thought-forms of that setting, and in conversation with that dominating world-view.

Alongside this external influence is one closer to home, still 'foreign', but perhaps more potent—that of Canaanite religion. This is a competing voice, and a visible opponent to Hebrew Yahwism. The danger of a pluralistic syncretism is apparent. To be sure, this influence had already absorbed much from the imperial world-view, and so the Narrative response is a mixture of these two competitors for the heart and mind of the people.

We shall regard this second voice as a minor voice in this discussion. It remains in the background; it cannot be ignored, but for the purposes of this paper we shall not draw directly on this background in any detail. Its place is similar to the competing voices in our own pluralistic society, in which we speak and think, usually unconsciously. Our task, like that of the biblical narrator, is to communicate within our thought-forms while putting them to our own purposes

in opposition to that world-view—a doubly difficult task, but, one which we attempt with biblical precedent.⁵

To these biblical contexts we should also add the New Testament Christian context. This context is left to Dr Kent Brower.

This, then, is the context in which we shall pursue this study. The hermeneutical standpoint is that of *a historical-critical approach*.

It is also *a literary approach*. By this I do not mean the old literary criticism of separating sources within the narrative. Commentators continue to speak of ‘J’ and ‘P’, but with little conviction. These ciphers now speak of strands of the story, woven together. I come closer to new literary practice, though attempting to place myself apart from the Reader Oriented approaches so well-known in the Sheffield stable of publications. There are vast volumes of material to which I shall not refer here—the ‘special-pleading’ sorts (Feminist; Liberationist; White Middle-class Male-ist). This literary approach views the narrative as literature in which the words have been chosen on purpose, and therefore tell us something of the narrator’s intent. It tries to listen to the narrator as a listener would, hearing signals from the words which are understood within his/her world-view and vocabulary. Yet, I shall be reading through a specific lens: the one which asks the question, ‘What does this narrative have to say about sin?’

The question is one to which we all bring preconceptions, and therefore I shall remain in dialogue with other commentators as a check. We may find it is not the kind of question of primary concern to the narrator. But we shall ask it because this is our duty here.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PRIMEVAL NARRATIVE

Before examining key texts which have to do with ‘sin’, let us do a broad-brushed sketch of the narrative flow of Genesis 1-11. It will remain tempting to stop and make mention of a number of intriguing and valuable points of value, but this sketch will draw attention to the relationship between God/Yahweh and the human/humankind.

1:1-2:4a.

The account of creation is told in simple, even though repetitive, beauty. This account speaks primarily about God. He is in the beginning; he is the one who creates, and he alone; he is the only one who speaks, and everything he commands is done accordingly. God’s sovereign will and purpose is declared.

⁵ A question seldom addressed, I believe, is just how successful the biblical narrator was. He has great influence on subsequent belief, far removed from the pervasive influence of his contemporary worldview, but subject to succeeding generations of influence. It would seem likely, given Israel’s history, that the narrator/s did not carry the day in their own time—possibly due to their own involvement in their culture.

The second noticeable aspect of the account is God's satisfaction with what he does. He speaks, it comes into existence, he sees it, and he pronounces it 'good'.

This second point directs us to the third key aspect of the account. The creation of the Human (*ha'adam*) is the last of all. Although occasional rabbinic interpretation has taken this to mean it to be the least of creation⁶, the consensus of both Jewish and Christian interpretation has been to see this as the climax of creation. The emphatic use of the verb 'create' (three times in v 27) with regard to *ha'adam*, and the relation of this creation to his own image, confirm this to be the intention. This, too, is considered to be good. At the end of the account, the whole of God's purposeful creation is declared to be 'very good indeed'.

The 'nature' of the Human as in God's image is not explicit within the text. However, the commands give us some clue: the Human shares to some extent in God's sovereignty, being told—among other things—to subdue the earth and have dominion over all that lives, and to eat of every plant for food.

2:4b-3:24

The narrative now zooms in on the Human creation. We are met with the first example of a common tool of Hebrew canon and narrative—the placing of two accounts of the same story side-by-side. Chapter Two appears to be the 'worm's eye' view of creation, laid alongside the 'bird's eye' view of Chapter One.⁷ Yet, this is more than a second account, because Chapter Two cannot stand without Chapter Three. The narrative moves our understanding of creation along considerably further than Ch 1.

Ch 2, in comparison to Ch 1, shows Yahweh God 'making' and 'forming' the Human. Yahweh is still the one who initiates, and plans. But now we see the Human formed of the soil, *ha'adamah*, essentially 'earthy'. The commands given do not emphasise sovereignty, but service. The Human is to 'serve' the garden, and 'guard/keep' it (this is work, not 'paradise'!). The creation of the Human is not complete, however, until the Woman is taken and 'built' from his side. The Human becomes 'Man' and 'Woman', but one flesh.⁸ And, they are naked but unashamed in each other's presence. The emphasis of this account of the Human seems to be on the creation of 'community', the essential need of fellowship, for it is 'not good' to be alone.

On this foundation, the tone changes in Ch 3. We are introduced to the first theologian—the serpent.⁹ Conversation takes place which results in the Man and Woman being sent from the Garden. More regarding this in the next section. For

⁶ Not a bad thought to keep in mind.

⁷ I am forever in debt to Gordon Thomas for placing this metaphor in my mind many years ago.

⁸ Issues of gender, while of great importance here, can only be mentioned in passing in this study.

⁹ If by 'theology' we mean 'talking *about* God' rather than speaking *to* God, which is prayer. Surely, true theology will be prayer!

now, what do we see of the relationship between Yahweh and the Human? Yahweh has provided everything for the Human, and given him/her a task. With the commanded task is a commanded prohibition, which introduces the potential for conflict—an essential ingredient of any plot. Disobedience to this prohibition brings a change in the relationship with Yahweh, and Man *viz* Woman. When they see each other, the couple are now ashamed; they attempt to hide from God. They seek to avoid responsibility for their actions.

There is no discernible difference in Yahweh's provision, however. He continues to provide for them, making garments for them (and removes them from the Garden lest they eat of the Tree of Life and 'live forever', and thus see no end to their 'grief'). The Garden is now guarded by others, and they are kept out.

4:1-16

The next story brings us to the next generation—the first to live wholly outside the Garden. Two sons are born, and both bring offerings to Yahweh from their work. One is accepted, and the other is not. Cain responds to the rejection of his offering by killing his brother, and the result of this first murder is exile—further east of Eden, in the land of wandering.

Notable in this account is the presumption that worship, and therefore fellowship with God, is a part of life. Giving of offerings is not remarked on as new, simply as existing from the beginning. No reason is given for the rejection of Cain's offering. But, his angry, and depressed¹⁰, response is described as 'sin'.

The first term for sin is introduced only now. It is not defined, simply understood. Further, the resulting curse with regard to the soil (*ha'adamah*) is directly related to the murder, in mirror image, of the curse of the soil regarding the Humans in Ch 3. Punishment seems to be related to sin.

Cain's relationship to Yahweh changes. He 'goes out from the presence of Yahweh'. He sees it as an expulsion; he wanders further east. Yahweh, however, continues to care for him, providing him a mark of protection from any who would kill him.

4:17-5:32

The first of the genealogical lists now appears. We may note one or two points for our purposes. One, Cain's line increases in violence (Lamech), but is the source of creative and cultural expansion.

Two, the Woman's line (and 'Adam's') continues 'in the likeness of God'. People worship Yahweh, and they multiply. Whatever happened in Chs 3 and 4, the likeness of God is still intact.

¹⁰ The evident translation of 'wayiplu phanav', וַיִּפְּלוּ פָנָיו.

People also maintain hope that the curse upon the ground will find relief. The hope seems to lie in the expectation of the birth of a new generation which will bring rest to the world-weary generations (including Adam, apparently, who seems not to have retired!). Lamech names his son 'Noah/Comfort/Rest' in this hope. How this is to come about is not suggested.

6:1-4

The scene is now set for decisive action on the part of Yahweh. He appears to grow weary of humanity, so he puts a limit on his patience to 120 years.¹¹ The reason given is only, 'since they are flesh'. This enigmatic passage offers only this enigmatic statement, but it draws attention to another 'given' of the Narrative: the relationship between Yahweh and his created Humanity has always been fractious!

6:5-9:29

This enigmatic word now finds explication in the introduction to the Flood Account. Yahweh looks at his creation again, and finds it is not good. It is 'evil', 'corrupt', and 'violent'. Only one man defies this evaluation: Noah. Yahweh grieves over his creation, and decides total annihilation is the only option left,¹² except for Noah's family.

The story of the flood is fulsomely told. For our purposes we note only these points:

One, the story is bracketed by Yahweh's evaluation of the heart of Humankind—its inclination is only to evil daily ('every day'). At the beginning, this is the reason for destruction of humanity, and the resolution of Yahweh's weariness of 'mere flesh'. At the end, Yahweh recognises that nothing of significance has changed (more on this later), but decides that he will nevertheless continue in relationship with Humankind even with this understanding. He renews his blessing upon all creation, and especially upon Humankind, prohibiting the shedding of human blood, and making an eternal covenant of grace—never to destroy Humankind again.

Yahweh's expectations do not take long to be fulfilled. Noah and his son Ham exhibit undesirable behaviour before the story is over. Noah starts a new creation—but, he is not the one to bring relief from grief.

¹¹ Opting here for this as referring to the amount of time before the Flood, rather than life-span of humans.

¹² The sense of 'blotting out'.

10:1-32

The genealogy of chapter ten serves to show that Yahweh's blessing is fulfilled and honoured by Noah's sons. Humankind is fruitful and multiplies and fills the whole earth.

11:1-9

Another crisis occurs, as the whole earth decides to build a name for itself, and to reach into the very heavens. Yahweh sees that 'there will be no restraint to what they do', so confounds their language and scatters them.

The issue lies in this lack of a 'fence' to human plans and ambitions. This creates a new source of conflict for Yahweh. The community that he created in Ch 2 now is forced to scatter in confusion.

11:10-32

The Primeval Narrative closes with a genealogy which brings us to the family of Terah, which has moved from Ur to Haran on its way to Canaan. Where Ch 10 expanded the population from one family to the whole earth, Ch 11 focuses the attention to one family.

In view of the direction of all which precedes, we are left with some questions, such as, what happens next? Terah has three sons, just like Noah. But we do not know for certain who to focus our attention upon. Since Noah did not bring the relief expected by his father, perhaps we are to look for one of this generation to bring relief.

One son dies in Ur, so we know we can expect nothing from there. The other two sons each marry, but Abram's wife is barren. Our attention focuses on two sources of hope: Nahor, of whom no child is named, and Lot, the son of the late Haran, who travels with the family.

The family of Terah leaves Ur to go to Canaan. We do not know why. But, we do know that they do not complete the journey. They stop in Haran, half-way, and Terah dies there.

It is only in Chapter 12 that we learn the key to this whole puzzle: Yahweh calls Abram to be a great nation. He blesses him for the purpose of making him a blessing to all nations. There *is* reason for hope!

Summary:

What can we draw from this overview? I suggest the following:

One, very little appears to be said about the origin of sin, or even the first sin. The generic term 'sin' occurs only once, in Ch 4—related to Cain, and not to the

Man and Woman. None of the other vocabulary for sin is present.¹³ ‘Evil’ is clearly in view in the rationale for the Flood. But the precise definition of the source of the evil is not explicit. What comes through is the simple fact that ‘sin’ is a ‘given’, just as ‘God’ is a given in the narrative. The vocabulary does not have to be there, because everyone knows what it is already. This means that if we are going to understand ‘sin’ in these narratives we must look beyond the vocabulary for ‘sin’.

Secondly, the flow of the narrative is from God’s statement of the goodness of his creation to his decision to un-create what has become a source of grief, to an on-going element of hope within Humankind (an ‘eschatological’ expectation) that someone will bring relief from grief and conflict. Looking back from the beginning of Ch 12 we see a consistent determination of Yahweh to bless his creation, and a persistent determination of Humankind to resist that blessing. But Yahweh does not withhold the blessing, nor does he abandon Humanity. Humankind is never so far removed that Yahweh cannot and does not keep communication open.

There is no evidence of a change in the makeup of the Human between Ch 1 and Ch 5. The Human is still in the likeness of God, and still capable of the same sort of decision-making as the first couple. What has changed is the nature of the relationship between God and the Human. The Man and the Woman were created in open relationship with God, and acted in such a way that they obscured that relationship, and created distance from God. For succeeding generations of Humankind the opposite is the case: they are born into the distant relationship, and must act to come into open relationship. This can be seen to happen in Ch 4, with the bringing of offerings, and in Ch 5 with ‘calling on the name of Yahweh’. With Abraham will come the means of restoration of the way to be born into relationship—covenant. The Primeval Narrative deals with the problem of sin by starting with the Human predicament and moving towards the Divine answer.¹⁴

This brings us to a third, and crucial, observation. The modern (and post-modern) approach to these narratives is to see them in individualist terms. This is to focus on the individuals, and see the actions as particular to individuals. However, the narrative does not lead in this direction. The stubborn (too strong a word?) narrative device of calling the characters of Chs 2-3 *ha’adam* and *ha’iyshah*, ‘the Man’ and ‘the Woman’, is obscured in many translations (and even the NT) by writing ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve’. The generic naming of Genesis (e.g., giraffe, ostrich, woman) points to the corporate sense of the story. These characters are representative figures for all of humankind (which is not the same as saying

¹³ This depends on how Cain’s words in 4:13, גְּדוּל עוֹנֵי מִנְשָׂא, are to be translated. NRSV reads, ‘My punishment is more than I can bear’, but it could also be, ‘My iniquity is more than I can bear’, or, ‘My iniquity/guilt is too great to forgive’.

¹⁴ This is certainly the opposite of Paul’s approach in Romans 5 (as pointed out in TA Noble’s *Prologomena*), but it is not a modern theological approach.

‘mythological’). The hearers of these stories come with the assumption that sin exists; they also come with the assumption that God deals with his whole people, and does this by means of his covenant relationship. So, the definitions of sin we might find in this Narrative, and the implications to be drawn from them, have to keep the community in view at all times.

With these observations in mind we turn now to a closer examination of the key passages for understanding sin in the Primeval Narrative. Since word-study of terms for sin will not help us, we must turn to a close reading of the narrative to allow the story itself to explain.

ONE: FROM THE GARDEN

We return to the *crux* passage, 2:4-3:24, as the base for reading forwards and backwards through the whole of the Narrative, and with reference to the whole OT, of Ch 3. We will investigate the factors which affect our understanding of ‘sin’ in the order in which they appear in the Narrative.

Who serves, and where?

The command given the Human in 2:15 is ‘to guard’ and ‘to serve’ (*la’abod*) the Garden where he had placed him. The particular focus of this command is jarring in consideration of the frame of the story. In 2:5 the formation of the Human arises directly, and seemingly in response to, the observation that no plant had yet grown because ‘there was no one to serve (*la’abod*) the ground’. But, immediately upon making the Human, the Lord places him in his specially prepared Garden as the chief keeper and gardener. It would seem that the rest of the earth—or, at least of *ha’adamah*—is to continue unfruitful (contra 1:11) while the Garden flourishes for the sake of the Human.

At the end of the story, however, the need of the rest of the Ground is recalled, as the Human is sent out from the Garden ‘to serve (*la’abod*) the Ground from which he was taken’ (3:24). The story ends with the stated problem of 2:5 met by the Earthy Human made by Yahweh. This *inclusio* would suggest that the outcome is good for the Ground, even though a source of pain (3:17) for the Human.

The task of service, at any rate, is to be seen as a positive statement regarding the Human because it is related to his formation. So, when we come to the story of the Two Brothers we should expect reference to service to be in keeping with this. And we do see this to be the case. The two sons of Eve are introduced: Abel is a tender of sheep; Cain is a ‘servant of the Ground’ (*‘obed ’adamah*)—of the two, more closely representing the reason for his creation. We should be positively disposed to him, for he is keeping the command. It is only when he defiles the ground by shedding innocent blood that this is turned against him: ‘You are cursed from the Ground...when you serve the Ground it will not give

you its strength' (3:12). Cain's punishment is in keeping with the crime, which is a crime of oppression (the normal focus of 'crying out' in the OT) against the Ground he was supposed to serve.¹⁵

In summary, the Human is to be viewed as essential to the fruitfulness of the Ground in Chs 2-4, being formed for the purpose of service to the Ground (of which the Garden is a part). Whatever happens in the Garden which results in expulsion¹⁶ of the Human, the punishment does not include service to the Ground, which is his very (specifically male) reason for existence.

Of What is the Human Formed?

We have used the terminology of 'formation' with regard to the creation of the Human because of the distinction within the account itself. In Ch 1 God 'creates'. In Ch 2 Yahweh 'forms'. This term has major significance for understanding the makeup of the Human in regard to 'sin', or 'sinfulness'. The verb, *yatsar*, appears here with Yahweh as the subject and the Human as the object. The noun, *yetser*, appears in 6:6 and 8:21 with the Human as the subject *and* (apparently) the object. It is necessary to consider these passages together at this point, for there are two different denotations of the word:

1. The first, and primary, sense of the term is that of creative action. When humans are the subject of 'forming', the object is often some sort of fashioned good—usually pottery.¹⁷ The relation of this to Gen 2 is an ongoing argument,¹⁸ but the image of malleable stuff in the hands of a craftsman is suitable to helping understanding of the action here.

The verb is found most often throughout the OT, not with a human as the actor, but with God himself as the subject. In one set of usage, the OT text is alluding primarily to Gen 1-2: Ps 74:17, in a psalm to the harvest, the Lord forms the summer and winter; in Ps 104:24-26 God forms Leviathan to sport in the sea; and in Ps 103:14 God knows how we were formed, made of dust.¹⁹ In a larger set of passages God's forming speaks of re-creation, with regard to Israel. In Second Isaiah, where new creation is the theme, all the vocabulary of Genesis 1 and 2 is

¹⁵ One might note, in passing, contemporary implications from this story for concern for the created order, both environment and non-human life, all of which are affected by Human disobedience.

¹⁶ The word *גָּרַשׁ* used in 3:24 and 4:14 can be seen to have positive results, even when the manner is negative. Cf Exod 6:1, 10:11, 11:1, where the promise that Pharaoh will drive Israel before him is part of the planned exodus. The LXX allows no such ambiguity, and the Christian readers of the LXX would view the *ekbal lein* of these verses in the same light as Jesus' 'casting out' of the money changers from the temple, and evil spirits from hapless peasants.

¹⁷ E.g., 2 Sam 17:28; 1 Chron 4:23; Ps 2:9; Isa 22:11 (+ 6x). The creativity is misplaced when the object is an idol: Isa 43:10, 44:9-20, Hab 2:18.

¹⁸ Westermann mentions Vriezen's objection to limiting the sense to the potter's craft, because Gen 2:7 does not speak of 'clay', but of 'dust'. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984^{ET}), 203.

¹⁹ Also Pss 94:9, 95:8; Isa 44:24, 45:7-8; Jer 10:16, 33:2, 51:19.

displayed: creating, calling, making, and forming. Interestingly, Isaiah's use of 'forming' outnumbers his use of 'creating'. The parallel to God's relation to the first Human, and to the unresolved new start after the Flood, is patent, and Second Isaiah seems clearly to make use of Genesis terminology.

This frequently used image of the Lord forming the Human, and his People, with its evocation of the potter, points to a plasticity of the object which the artist moulds to his/her own purpose. In Genesis 2, Yahweh forms his Human for the purpose of service in fellowship and community.

2. The second sense in which 'forming' is used in the OT is that which is in conflict with God's formation of the Human. This is the sense in which it appears in the Flood Narrative. Outside of the Garden the malleable Human is capable of contrary formation. He is subject to prevailing and contiguous influences. By Ch 6 the formation, the *yetser*, of the heart of the Human is wholly evil, and that all day long. This tendency, or inclination, or plan, has changed from Yahweh's purpose.

The testimony of the OT echoes this conflict of purposes. Whenever the 'plans' of humans are mentioned, they are found to clash with God's. But God knows human plans (Ps 33:15: 'From where he sits the Lord ...watches...he who forms the hearts of them all observes their deeds...'), and exercises his own plans in response: 'Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, "He has no understanding"?' (Isa 29:16). No, for no plan can be hidden from the Lord, who will cut off the one who seeks evil (vv 15 and 20). On the other hand, the ones whose purposes are supported by trust in Yahweh, will be kept in peace (Isa 26:3). Nevertheless, as clay in the potter's hand may be spoiled, and the potter is able to re-work it into another vessel, so Yahweh can change his mind about his people. He can cease to do good for them, and do evil instead if they do not turn from their evil thoughts (Jer 18:1-11).

This latter passage is replete with the vocabulary of Genesis 6, and so illuminates our understanding. Yahweh's statement in Gen 6:6 seems to have placed him in a frightful corner, where he can do little. But Jeremiah clarifies that he is able to re-form his own creation at and according to his own will. And he does so in the course of biblical history.

With this background for the *yetser*, we realise we ask the wrong question by saying, 'of what is the human formed?'. We can see that the Human, is 'mere flesh' (6:3), made of dust. The question should rather be, 'Who forms the human?' In response to this we discover that the human is subject to external influences at every stage, and capable of new formation from the very beginning. The 'original' forming is of God's own purpose. Yet, other influences may attract the thoughts of the Human purpose to where they become all-consuming, and wholly evil. Regardless of this fact—the fact we see most clearly—the Human is

still flesh, still formed of dust by Yahweh, and he is able to re-form it according to his own purposes. This conclusion seems to me to be the clear intent of the Narrative. The 'evil' inclination is not an intrinsic part of the Human, but a result of external influences. The *yetser* is misshapen, but still the same substance made by God.

Naked Prudence

There is a cunning play on words between 2:25 and 3:1 on the root 'arum. In 2:25 the couple are 'naked' (*ārūmmiym*) and unashamed; in 3:1 the serpent²⁰ is more 'crafty'/shrewd (*ārûm*) than any creature Yahweh had made. The play goes beyond this to 3:7,10 and 11. The play on words is noted by all commentators, but little is made of it beyond the note. This cannot help but be noted as an important pun for the narrator, occurring as it does four times. There are four different ways of pronunciation, four different of spellings from the same root, having two different meanings.²¹

The listeners must decide upon the proper meaning from the context. Presumably, they would grasp the first as 'naked', and upon hearing the second would laugh at the idea of a serpent more naked than any other beast. When minds had caught up with the ears, on the third occurrence of the word they may now gasp to hear that the couple 'knew that they were crafty'!

This interplay is more than a little bit of fun, precious as the thought of inspired humour is to some of us. Under the joke lies a serious argument,²² and the argument seems to be a Wisdom dispute. In Proverbs and Job the term appears with both the first two spellings/pronunciations, and with both meanings.²³

1. In Proverbs *ārûm* is a virtue, and so is to be translated 'prudence' rather than 'shrewdness' or 'craftiness'. The prudent is the opposite of the fool (e.g., 12:16,23). What is of pertinence is that at least four of six occurrences might be taken as intertextual interaction with Genesis 2-3. Prov 12:23: 'The *adam* *ārûm* conceals knowledge, but the mind of a fool calls out folly' (the serpent offered knowledge, but concealed the true effects; the woman and the man prove

²⁰ There is no evident reason to discuss the questions which arise over the role and identity of the serpent here. We will take the narrative at face value in seeing the serpent as one of the creatures formed by Yahweh, which just happens to be the first to seek to mould the Human in a different fashion.

²¹ We miss the repetitive sense in translation:

וַיְהִי שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא יִתְבַּשְׁשׁוּ: וְהַנָּחַשׁ הָיָה עָרוּם מִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה

וְהַפְקֵחָנָה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עִרְמָם הֵם: וְאִירָא כִּי-עִירָם אֲנֹכִי:

²² Yehuda T Radday and Athalya Brenner, in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), show persuasively and exhaustively that humour in the Bible is always directed at someone, at someone's expense. There is no 'innocent joking' in Hebrew!

²³ In fact, in Proverbs the singular is 'prudence' and the plural 'naked'; in Job the spellings are reversed.

to be foolish?); 13:16: ‘Every *‘ārûm* works with knowledge, but the fool displays folly’; 22:3/27:12: ‘The *‘ārûm* sees danger and hides, but the simple go on, and suffer/pay the penalty’. The three-fold statement that the couple ‘knew they were *‘ārûm*’ can be taken as ironic when read against Proverbs. The Human is ‘the fool’, and not the one who ‘knows’. In a further irony, the serpent is truly prudent.

2. The situation in Job stands in contrast. Sayings on the *‘ārûmmiym* are found on the lips of Eliphaz, the foremost ‘comforter’ of Job. In 5:12, God ‘frustrates the devices (*maḥšêbôt*, cf Gen 6:5) of the *‘ārûmmiym* so their hands work no sound knowledge’. In 15:5, Job’s ‘iniquity teaches [his] mouth; and [he] chooses the tongue of the *‘ārûmmiym*’. Here the word is taken pejoratively, as ‘craftiness’. Eliphaz, the voice of traditional Wisdom, castigates so-called prudence as base iniquity. Comparing this to Genesis 3, the application of this description to the serpent is far from ironic, rather confirming judgement upon the serpent as a deceiver. At risk for Eliphaz, in Job, is ‘the fear of the Lord’ (15:4). Job is wise in his own eyes, not with wisdom from God. Eliphaz’ voice speaks in unison with Genesis 3 (and 6), and points to the fundamental error in the Garden—the choice (the missing word in Genesis) to listen to the *‘ārûmmiym* serpent does away with the fear of God, which is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7).

At this point we need to remind ourselves of the word with which *‘ārûmmiym* is first paired in 2:25—shame. In Western culture this term has lost meaning, being watered down to little more than a sense of polite embarrassment (and even this is viewed as a throwback to Victorian prudery for most). In non-Western cultures, however, shame continues to be a weighty concept. In the Philippines, for example, an elaborate system of behaviour is built into the culture to respond to and avoid shame and loss of face, and given the sanction of society. In many non-Western cultures today, and among those from the East transplanted to the West, bringing shame on the family can still have fatal consequences. The appearance of shame at this early point in the story of humanity is a signal of its importance in human make-up, and in what follows. The couple are naked and without shame. Upon eating the fruit, and the opening of their eyes, they recognise that they are naked, and are ashamed. Shame is related to the sense of guilt here. As such, it is a vital link in our understanding of what is at stake in this narrative, and is all that can help us make sense of the scandal of Noah’s nakedness in Chapter 9.

3. There is one more strand of intertextuality to follow. The LXX translates into Greek with two completely different words, just as is necessary in any other language. The word *phronimos* is used in the Greek OT of a virtue in the same way as *‘ārûm* in Proverbs, e.g., of Joseph in Gen 41. When we look to the NT, however, the connotation is negative. Paul writes to the Romans so they ‘may not claim to be *wiser* than [they] are’ (11:25; also 12:16, & 2 Cor 11:19). In 1

Corinthians he twice uses the word ironically (4:10; 10:15): ‘I am a fool, you are *wise*’.

It is valuable to raise this point in reference, not to Gen 3:1, etc., but in relation to the discussion on the *yetser*. In view of Paul’s use of a cognate term, *phronéma*, in Romans 8:6, ‘The *phronéma* set on the flesh is death, but the *phronéma* set on the Spirit is life and peace’, one could suggest this term would be related to the concept of *yetser* as we described it above.²⁴ If so, then we must also take into consideration that, if Paul was a reader of the LXX, he would know of this connotation to the word, and chose not to make the *yetser* connection.

Summary

In sum, this suggestion of an underlying Wisdom debate draws attention to the significance of ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ in this narrative. The question is, what side is the narrator on? To answer this we must move directly to a discussion of ‘knowledge’.

To Know Good and Evil

We were given a clue to the test of Ch 3 in 2:16-17, where Yahweh issued the prohibition against eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, given as a rider on the permission to eat freely of the fruit of every other tree. That prohibition was not commented on at the time, but simply laid the groundwork for the test to come.

In the conversation initiated by the serpent attention is immediately brought to this tree, and to the question of knowledge. The serpent claims that ‘to know good and evil’ is to be divine.²⁵ The woman accepts this, desiring to be wise, and so eats of the fruit of the tree—followed by the man.²⁶ The result, however, is not divinity, but shame. The couple find they are naked, and neither prudent nor wise. What, then, is their state? Their eyes are open, and they know good and evil.

Is this such a bad thing? Let us consider the terminology used here.

‘Knowledge’

The noun is *da’at*. Not surprisingly, the word is essentially a wisdom term.²⁷ In Proverbs, with nearly half the OT occurrences, knowledge is a gift of God to be desired, and a companion of wisdom. In Job, too, true knowledge is from God,

²⁴ This is not the word used to translate *yetser* in Genesis 6. That Paul does not use **plassein** in Romans 8 may have nothing to do with the LXX reading. It is reasonable to suppose he chose to use a word more suitable to his purposes.

²⁵ *Elohim* might be taken as ‘gods’, in an anti-Canaanite polemic, in contrast to Yahweh Elohim of the Narrative. This has to be secondary to the sense taken here.

²⁶ Who joins in without even bothering to put up an argument as did the woman!

²⁷ At least 60 out of more than 90 occurrences of the noun are in a Wisdom context.

and begins with God's knowledge. Job rehearses what he wants to say face-to-face to the one who formed him, in Ch 10: 'Upon your knowledge, I am not wicked, and I have no one to deliver me' (v7). In the end, he 'knows' that counsel without God's knowledge is vain (42:3), for God tells him so (38:2). Qoheleth, on the other hand, finds knowledge to be a source of toil and pain (Eccl. 1:18),²⁸ but acknowledges that it *is* a gift from God which is better than the alternative.

In Genesis 3, knowledge is related to another wisdom term, 'insight', *haškiyl*. The woman looks closely at the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and sees that it is 'to be desired to make one *haškiyl*'. The appeal of the fruit is aesthetically pleasing to the eye, but beyond that is the longing for discernment. Ps 36:4 seems to comment on this by saying that the wicked 'are set on a way (*haškiyl*) that is not good'. But, once again, the word is fundamentally a positive one in the rest of the OT. There are two broad meanings: one meaning relates to careful attention and insight; the second, most common to Proverbs, is a synonym for 'prudence', or circumspect behaviour.²⁹ What causes trouble in Genesis 3 seems to be that the woman 'desires' this insight. This desire, *ḥāmad*, is that which is proscribed in Exodus 20:17, the tenth commandment, and the result here is that the woman's future longings (a different term, *šûqah*) will be bound up with her husband (3:16).

In sum, knowledge is a good thing, and insight is a good thing. But in Genesis 3, they bring evil because they are sought from misdirected longings.

'Good and Evil'

Commentaries on 'the knowledge of good and evil' differ widely on the significance of this phrase. For some it is a *merism* for 'everything';³⁰ for others it is about sexual knowledge;³¹ for still others it is 'moral autonomy',³² or legal responsibility.³³ Little considered is seeing the phrase as a common figure of speech in the ancient world to denote 'coming of age'. Deut 1:39 and Isa 7:15,16 both relate the ability to discern between good and evil with what might be called 'the age of accountability'. Beyond this stage, to set one's way on what is 'not good' and not to reject evil is to be wicked (Ps 36:4, again); but the righteous 'shut their eyes from looking on evil' (Isa 33:15).

²⁸ Neither term using the same vocabulary as Genesis, but containing the same sense.

²⁹ See here BDB, 968.

³⁰ Nahum M Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 19.

³¹ See discussion by Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 242-248.

³² E.g., Victor P Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 165.

³³ Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Publishers, 1987), following W M Clark, *JBL* 88 (1969).

Knowing good and evil is to be of an age to choose between them, so *is* an issue of moral accountability. The Isaiah 7 passage draws attention to this in particular. The Lord gives Ahaz a sign that Rezin and Remaliah will disappear before a certain child who is to be born to a maiden becomes a youngster who can ‘choose good’ and ‘refuse evil’ (vv 11-16). The NRSV oddly translates *na‘ar* in v 16 as ‘child’, which suggests a very young boy. However, there is a very good Hebrew word for ‘lad’ (*yeled*). *Na‘ar*, on the other hand, consistently relates to adolescence.

This is borne out by reference to Genesis 8:21. After the Flood, the Lord repeats his statement of 6:5, that the *yetser* of the Human heart is evil. The difference from the prior statement, however, is the qualification ‘from his youth’ (*minna‘arav*). This biblical phrase can refer to a girl before marriageable age, but old enough to make vows of her own which can stand with legal validity (Lev 22; Nu 30); or to the age at which a youngster begins to be a warrior/leader (1 Sam 12:3, 17:33); or to the age at which a male may already be married (Prov 5; Ps 127) and a female a bride (all of Jeremiah and Ezekiel references to Israel as Yahweh’s bride). ‘Youth’, then, is an age at which one is ready for responsibility, and can be culpable for sins (Job 13:20; Ps 25), and yet is not wholly adult. This refers, not to a child, but to a young adolescent.

Summary

Throughout the rest of the OT, awareness of evil, the ability to make decisions regarding good and evil, and culpability for choosing evil, begins in adolescence. Genesis 3 and 8 will need to be read in light of these figures of speech.

‘Their eyes were opened’

An additional phrase is used to describe what takes place when the Man and Woman eat of the fruit of the tree. ‘Their eyes were opened.’ This is a common figure of speech as well (occurring about 20 times in the OT). The phrase is always used in a positive sense of enlightenment or clarity of vision. It can refer to physical sight (e.g., 2 Kgs 4:35), or of supernatural vision (2 Kgs 6:17, Gen 21:19), or may be used metaphorically of clear-eyed judgement (Ex 23:8; 2 Kgs 19:16; Dan 9:18). All are contrasted to blindness.

In view of this, we should expect the use of the figure here to have a positive sense. And it may be that this is the case. The serpent promised that their eyes would be opened to divine vision, but instead they are opened to recognise their nakedness. In view of the play on this word, we can see this as recognition that they are fools, and the proper accompanying shame/guilt which comes with this. How they act when Yahweh comes to see them will decide whether this is healthy guilt or not.

Summary

Viewed individually, we find that all the terminology for knowledge appearing in this chapter is essentially positive in the rest of scripture. But here in Genesis 3 the narrative leads us to see the whole as a choice for evil, and the cause for expulsion from the Garden. How shall we resolve this dilemma? Is the Genesis account an anti-Wisdom diatribe, as George Mendenhall has argued?³⁴ Was it Yahweh's intention to keep the Human in a child's state forever? Is 'paradise' devoid of wisdom and knowledge?

These questions can hardly be answered positively—if for no other reason than that we would have to throw away all our scriptures! The resolution of the dilemma must be traced to the *source* of knowledge, rather than the knowledge itself. Desire is not wrong, for Yahweh made *all* the fruit of the Garden to be desirable (2:9); but the desire was to be for food, not for understanding. Insight is good, but it is to be at Yahweh's formation, and not at the hands of another. Knowledge is good, not with a view to being divine, but within the context of the fear of the Lord. Knowledge, insight, and prudence are wrong in the Garden because their source is found outside of Yahweh's tutelage, outside of relationship with him, and outside of the community of faith.

This last comment recalls us to one of our hermeneutical fundamentals: this story is not a pattern for every individual. It is a story about Humankind, and where true knowledge is to be found. Individualism is what is decried, for it breaks from the community and fellowship of the covenant relationship. Hoping for insight on their own terms, the first couple learn only that they are naked; acting without fear of the Lord, they discover that their knowledge makes them afraid.³⁵

The story, then, does not portray a childish existence as the desired state of existence, but a childlike fear of the Lord.

The Wages of Sin

We come at last to consider the consequences of knowledge gained illicitly; of disobedience to the protective law of Yahweh. The Lord asks the Man and the Woman each a question: 'Who told you that you were naked?'; 'What is this that you have done?' Then he pronounces judgement on each of the three actors in the fiasco. The consequences may be summed up in three headings: curse; grief; and death.

³⁴ See note 4.

³⁵ W Brueggemann has a moving comment at this point, *Genesis*, 52. He sees the story to be a reflection on what knowledge does to community: honouring boundaries leads to well-being.

A Curse

Up to this point all of God's speech has been in blessing and provision. Now he utters a curse. The serpent is cursed.³⁶ The Ground is cursed on account of the Man.³⁷ The Man and the Woman are not cursed. The meaning of the curse, however, is antagonism between *ha'adam* and *ha'adamah*.

Grief and Toil

The clearest consequence to both the Woman and the Man is grief (*'itsābôn*, 3:16, 17). The Woman experiences grief in childbirth, and vexation with regard to her husband. The Man will eat the plants of the field in grief/vexation all the days of his life.

The active difference in their status is that they are sent out from the Garden. This in itself will be eternal grief, and, at the least, represents a loss of potential. Substantially, however, the couple continue their appointed role of service—she to her husband,³⁸ and he to the Ground. But the curse on their account makes this burdensome.

Death

Interpretation is split on the question of whether the narrative teaches that Death is a penalty for the disobedience. On one hand, it appears that death is just now introduced, as return to *ha'adamah* (v 19). As such, death is set as a *limitation* to the grief of life, and the tree of life is withdrawn to protect the Human from grasping eternal life, and thus extending his grief and vexation for eternity.³⁹ On the other hand, the warning of Gen 2:17 makes clear that death is a consequence of disobedience—3:17 refers verbally back to 2:17⁴⁰—and so relates Yahweh's judgement to that prohibition.

It can be said, then, that death is a direct *consequence* for the disobedience of the couple. But it might also be said that it is not necessarily a *punishment*, but may be viewed as a limitation to grief in the task of serving the Ground. For the rest of

³⁶ I shall not enter into discussion on the so-called *Protoevangelium* of 3:15. Although this has an important place in the history of Christian interpretation, it cannot seriously be considered to be in the narrator's thoughts as a prophecy of Christ, and so is not germane to this discussion.

³⁷ And so, the whole of creation groans in birthpangs awaiting the redemption of the sons (Ro 8:22).

³⁸ 3:16, 'He shall rule over you.' A sidelight to this discussion, but pertinent to contemporary fundamentalist insistence that the 'headship' of the male is God's created order (based on Ephesians 5, etc), is to note that the subordination of the female to the male is *not* the created relationship, but is a consequence of disobedience. Therefore, the redemptive restoration of creation values would be the return to mutuality—'naked before each other, and unashamed'!

³⁹ Victor P Hamilton, following Skinner and Westermann, argues for death as a respite, and not a punishment, *Genesis 1-17*, 203-4. For him the penalty is expulsion, not death.

⁴⁰ G J Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 83.

the OT, death is not an enemy unless it comes too soon. Success is to die ‘old and full of days’.

Summary

The consequences of the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil can be viewed from two angles. Firstly, the Human comes of age morally and intellectually, but the basis of reaching insight is wrong, and disrupts community with God and within the Human family.

Secondly, the penalty given by Yahweh can be found in life as we know it: our knowledge and our toil is wearisome (cf Qoheleth), and is but a vapour, for the end is death.

TWO: AN INVITATION TO SIN

Our understanding of ‘sin’, original or otherwise, is not complete. Chapter Four names ‘sin’ for the first time, so we must attempt to understand what is meant.

The focus for understanding is the extremely problematic verses 6-7. The difficulty is not the terminology for sin; the word is the most common of the Hebrew terms for sin, *ḥattat*. As we have already stated, this is clearly understood by the first hearers, without need for explanation; it is not the first time they have heard about sin. For the narrator, sin is another given in this story. The difficulty is in the garbled text, which makes it difficult to know how to translate the words we know, much less the words we do not know. The problem is as old as the LXX, which also seems to have struggled with the Hebrew *Vorlage*. Compare these fairly literal translations:

MT: And Yahweh said to Qain, ‘Why are you angry, and why is your face fallen? Is it not that if you do well, [there is] a lifting; but if you do not do well, sin is *lying* at the door? For *you* is its longing, but *you* must master it.’⁴¹

LXX: And the Lord God said to Kain, ‘Why have you become grieved, and why is your face fallen? If you have not presented your offering correctly, but have not divided it correctly, you sinned. Be still, his turning [repentance?] [is/will be] for you, and you will rule him.’

The differences are accounted for by different vowel pointings, a change of punctuation, and two consonant changes (possible in scribal variation), and are enough to illustrate the difficulty of the passage. There is one conclusion which can be drawn before we go further, and that is that no major theological conclusions can be founded on such a doubtful text.

⁴¹ The emphasis comes with repetition of the personal pronoun.

The main question is in the meaning of the second half of verse 7, 'sin is lurking at the door, its desire is for you, and you must master it' (NRSV).

Firstly, what does this image portray? Modern commentators reflect the variety of thought throughout the centuries. Wenham, rejecting the theory that the word for 'lurking' is derived from the name of an Akkadian doorstep demon, nevertheless describes sin 'personified as a demon crouching like a wild beast'.⁴² Brueggemann is in similar mode, but draws on Jer 5:6 to view sin as a lion waiting, ready to leap.⁴³ Westermann offers the modern and unique conjecture that Cain is warned here by the ghost of the one who was murdered that it will haunt him.⁴⁴ These all have in common the image of sin as an aggressive external force which waits in ambush.

I believe it can be agreed that sin is to be viewed here as an external force. However, its motives and stance are open to a different interpretation. The participle, *robets*, which is used here is indeed used in the Bible of animals lying down, though once it is used of the poor. In every case the animal is at rest (Isa 35:7 describes an animal den as a resting place): sheep, donkeys, birds, young lions, leopards and kids, cows and bears. The image which would be in the mind of the listener to this story would more likely be that of Psalm 23, 'He makes me lie down (*robets*) in green pastures', than that of a demon lying in ambush.

This external force is more of a domesticated pet lying inside the door in defence than an attacking demon waiting outside. This image would parallel the Ch 3 account suitably, as so much of this story does.⁴⁵ In Ch 3 the serpent is given hospitality by the Woman, and the conversation is civil; the serpent is an external voice in opposition to the Lord. Sin is seen in the same position in Ch 4. Cain, however, can master it, lest it become wholly at home.

And this is the key to understanding the relation of Cain to sin in Ch 4. Yahweh is still speaking to him. He is still given options which include redemption of the situation. Yahweh says, 'If you do well...if you do not do well...'. Cain has a choice; he has personal responsibility over the situation. He can decide which way his tendency will be bent.⁴⁶ He can rule over it, according to his God-created ability (1:28).

That he does not does not mean that all hope of mastery is gone forever for all humanity. Cain goes out from the presence of the Lord, away from community, and so withdraws himself from the potential for forgiveness. Had he remained in community...what then?

⁴² Wenham, 105, by comparison to Akkadian, *rābiṣu*. See also Hamilton, 226.

⁴³ Brueggemann, 57.

⁴⁴ Which he emphasises is a conjecture only, 299f.

⁴⁵ The same task, the Ground, a sin, a punishment, exile, and protection for exile, all parallel Chs 2-3.

⁴⁶ This is the common conclusion of contemporary scholarship: Brueggemann, 58; Hamilton, 228; Westermann, 300.

THREE: NEW BEGINNINGS FOR HUMANKIND

Genesis 6:1-4 are perhaps the most enigmatic verses of the Bible. From as early as the 3rd Century BC imaginations have flowered profusely over the potential of the interbreeding of angels and humans, and the age of giants. The speculation clearly influenced the LXX translation. As enjoyable as the speculation is for a biblical scholar, such speculation is a diversion from our investigation. Whatever ancient mythological story underlies these verses, its magic (if not the mystique) has been drained to provide a bridge between the long-lived, but weary, generations of Ch 5, and the proliferation of wickedness which causes Yahweh to un-create the living creatures he formed from the Ground.

The story starts out in apparent blessing. God blessed the Human in Ch 1, with the command to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. And this is what this story describes. Humankind is multiplying on the Ground. We are told very quickly, however, that the method of family planning is not as Yahweh established it—it is not a Man and a Woman cleaving to each other, but Sons of God are the husbands and fathers. As we reflect on this oddity, we might note that this is the first of three ‘beginnings’ in the Primeval Narrative which are directly related to Chs 1-2: here Humankind multiplies, as commanded in 1:28; in 9:20 Noah ‘begins’ to plant a vineyard, apparently in keeping with the command to serve the Ground (3:23); and in 11:6 Humankind ‘begins’ to do whatever they will to do—in contradistinction to any command of Yahweh.

This last provides us the clue to these new beginnings. Whereas they derive, ostensibly, from the created order, each of these beginnings derives outside of God’s purposes. In Chapter 6 the human community is disrupted by these Sons of God, and this new beginning operates from a wholly corrupt basis (6:5).⁴⁷ In Chapter 9, Noah’s new start is in horticulture, not agriculture, and its results are unexpected!⁴⁸ Chapter 11, however, is the climax of Human organisation apart from God’s purposes. As the people of the earth build their tower to heaven, Yahweh sees it for what it really is. He says, ‘This is only the beginning of their work. Now there will be no restraint/fence (*batsar*) for them from all they will devise.’ Each new beginning by Humankind is a new pushing of the boundaries, and forming of plans from a misshapen will. The nature of Humankind is to seek

⁴⁷ The echo of the Beginning of Creation is subtle. The root of ‘multiply’ here is רבב rather than the רבה of 1:28. The difference seems to be that the former is used in the OT of adversaries (Gen 18:20, 49:23; Exod 23:29; Ps 3:2, etc). Further, the first involvement of the Sons of God is when they ‘see’ that the daughters of man are ‘good’—as God saw and pronounced in Ch 1. God pronounces everything good, and rests. The Sons of God pronounce the women good, and God gets no rest—while Lamech hopes for one who will bring him rest.

⁴⁸ To be sure, Noah’s drunkenness is not condemned—how could he be condemned for what he could not anticipate? But, he is not ‘serving the Ground’; rather, he seems to be planting a garden. The nature of the Human experiment is to advance technology without a clue as to what may result. From the Garden onwards, the results have always been a nasty surprise!

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to throw off restraint. The Primeval Narrative concludes by saying that Yahweh remains far above the highest imaginations of Humankind, and can confuse that imagination at any time.

With this in view, we can better understand Ch 6 verse 3: ‘Then Yahweh said, “My spirit will not remain in the Human forever, in view of the fact he is mere flesh...”’ The key here is in Yahweh’s explanation that his relationship with Humankind (and we are talking about the whole, not individual parts) is difficult because of Human limitation, ‘mere flesh’. Whether this is because of continual strife (seeing the word *yadon* to be related to *diyn*, as MT and Qumran mss), or increasing loss of patience, which will cause him to withdraw his presence (seeing it related to *yalon*, abide, as the LXX and Targums translate), the multiplication of humanity and its increasing wickedness leads Yahweh to the fateful decision announced in 6:7: he will blot all life from the Ground. But even now he does not leave Humankind without a hope; he chooses one who, perhaps, will bring rest.

WHERE IS HUMANKIND AT THE END OF THE BEGINNING?

It remains only for us to draw together the strands of the Narrative which remain at the end of Chapter 11.

- Humankind then was precisely in the situation we know it to be now. Our plight remains that of malleable flesh open to new impressions, and never learning from the failures of the past.
- God has been gracious throughout, even when wearied by the clamouring imagination of his creation. He continues to provide for humanity's needs; he remains open to fellowship.
- Sin is a given of human existence. But, it is not inherent to human substance. 'If you do well, there is forgiveness; if you do not do well, sin will become a friend. But, you can master it.'
- Culpability for sin is related to moral maturity. Humanity, as a community, is wholly culpable. Each person, however, is given the same choices to be formed by the Artist Maker—or by the latest external influence. Since each one is born into the Human community, that influence is strongest from the beginning, and prejudices the individual.
- In this community of sinfulness there are always righteous individuals, like Abel, Seth, Noah, or Abraham.
- As life began with one Human, so the future of Humanity focuses at the end on one Human who, it is hoped, will relieve Humankind from its grief and vexation, and the Ground from its curse. In the Primeval Narrative, who this is remains an open question. It is one of three possibilities—and the least likely is Abram. By the end of the OT canon the question still remains open, but the answer still lies within Abraham's family, and from Yahweh's chosen one.