Chapter One

Introduction

The Object of This Book

This book is a companion volume to *The Trial of Innocence: Adam, Eve, and the Yahwist*.[1] It prolongs my essay on the dialectic anthropology according to **J** in Gen 2:4—4:1. Each book stands on its own, however, and can be read independently.

Here again, because the story of Cain and Abel is so well and so universally known, as is the tale of Adam and Eve, there can hardly be a first "reading" of it. Even our first encounter with the text is already a "rereading." There is nothing to lament about for, as Gary Saul Morson states, the rereading "makes the reader a character in the work."[2] And, following the lead of Paul Ricoeur, it takes the reader to a "second naiveté." Chances are, as a matter of fact, that a rereading will not remain at the level of superficiality.

In the preceding myth on Adam and Eve, **J** (the so-called Yahwist literary source responsible for much of the narrative part in the chapters 2–11 of Genesis, amidst a larger work) masterfully showed that the human is always torn between the innocence of Eden and its denial, between what **J** now calls "doing well" and "not doing well"; in short, he is involved in a *dialectical trial of her innocence*. Each word—dialectical, trial, and innocence—is important here, since the cliché of "the Fall" is inadequate to characterize the events of Genesis 3. If one insists, nonetheless, on this worn out notion, it would be in the sense of an always recurring but avoidable fall of the human into existential guilt, a constant defeat of a human's capability to innocence. Nothing is determined, however, nothing

1. Cascade Books, 2006.
2. Morson, "Contingency and the Literature of Process," 256.

is transmitted seminally from generation to generation, for the world's redemption is always recurring and constant, thanks to those whom a Jewish tradition calls the *Lamed Vav*, the "thirty-six" righteous ones. Or is it perhaps the one unique just one—whose choice of innocence in our jungle-like society rescues it from being pure hell and constitutes as much a miracle as life itself?

Engaging another aspect of human dialectical existence, **J** in the story of Cain and Abel imagines a personification of innocence after Eden. Abel is such an incarnation, but, significantly, it is a transient and ghostly incarnation. Innocence is doomed to be short-lived. Its existence is to be quickly felt as unbearable and to be eliminated by the "powers that be," which Cain represents. Is it because innocence is a foreign body in humanity's organism? Not so, for the innocent Abel is the brother, perhaps the twin brother, of Cain. In the Adam and Eve myth, **J** had presented the original relation between male and female using the metaphor of a bifacial androgyny.[3] Now, another bifacial reality is conjured up: *I* and the *Other*, *I* and *Thou*, two siblings, same and different. Born of the same father and of the same mother, worshippers of the same God, with different and complementary occupations, the tiller and the shepherd, the sedentary and the nomad, the ground and the horizon, the plough and the lyre, Cain and Abel are—or should be—"one flesh." But, if humanity cannot survive without the plough,[4] tragically it believes that it can live without the lyre. In the eyes of the one whose name is Cain, that is, etymologically "Possession," innocence is not only as inconsistent as a dawn vapor on the surface of a field (Abel means "Breath"), but soon becomes offensive to his lifestyle. Then, from a trial of innocence (Genesis 3), history tumbles into an onslaught against innocence.

J's logic in having the Cain and Abel myth follow on the heels of the Adam and Eve myth is convincing. It is particularly evidenced in the first sentence of the second story: the birth of children continues the process of creation described in the first story. Literary criticism shows that, in all probability, the earlier tradition reported a mere genealogy right after the extradition of the primal couple from Eden. The genealogy is still apparent in 4:1–2 and 17–26.

3. See LaCocque, *The Trial of Innocence,* 114–27.

4. The pickax is one of the greatest gifts of the gods to humanity according to Mesopotamian mythology.

In this taxonomy of generations there are, as we shall explicate later, ominous details. But, in and of itself, a genealogy right there after the evocation of the horror of death upon the humans, is nothing short of a cry of victory. The created human innocence is on trial; it has not been relinquished wholesale to death. Life is triumphant. Eve's exclamation at the first ever birth of a child is immensely elating and enormously important. The translation of Gen 4:1 should not be reductive. Eve says that she has created a man with Yhwh. (She uses the verb *qanah* here instead of *bara'*, which is appropriate on at least two grounds: only God in the Bible is the subject of the verb *bara'*; and *qanah* is in alliteration with the name Cain.) Such a momentous text begs for more elaboration.[5]

J has inserted into the initial genealogy the story of two brothers' relationship. Its purpose is to pursue and prolong the anthropology started in Genesis 2–3. In those episodes, **J** showed that the transgression of the divine will has made dysfunctional the relationship with spouse and world. In the new development on Cain and Abel, the reader is introduced into the human family life. "Family life," says Eigen, "is a kind of primal swamp, a seedbed of possibilities. . . . Life teems in tangled ways."[6] But, as Immanuel Kant says, the evil in man starts "as soon as he is among men"[7]—even when the proximate is a brother, as **J** says.

Thus the dysfunction initiated by Adam and Eve's rebellion permeates ring after ring of human existence, until it reaches the whole of humanity and the world. The historical progression after Genesis 2–3 risks, in fact, being a regression to the chaos that preceded creation. Everything would be lost for good—as it almost will with the Flood—were it not for the advent of Abraham in Genesis 12. Then history transforms itself—in part—into a *Heilsgechichte* (a "history of salvation").

The following study is a literary-critical analysis of the myth of Cain and Abel. I read the narrative as an integrated didactic tale. Accordingly, I shall here consider the story in Genesis 4 as a literary unit. Besides,

5. This co-creation with God, Catherine Keller calls *creatio cooperationis* or *creatio ex profundis*; see her *Face of the Deep*, 117. I have myself stressed this point in my *The Trial of Innocence*.

6. Eigen, *Rage*, 54.

7. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (B 128–29, A 120–21, [85]); see below, 111 n. 100.

both the tight structure of the narrative and its uncanny density seem to confirm the textual integrity of the narrative, as Umberto Cassuto's study indicates.[8] Its verbal structure is well balanced:

a/ Genealogy: "Adam knew his wife" (1–2)
b/ Cain and Abel: their entreaty of Yhwh (3–5)
c/ Dialogue: Yhwh and Cain (6–7)
d/ Dialogue (aborted): Cain and Abel (8)
c'/ Dialogue: Yhwh and Cain (9–15)
b'/ Cain: exits from the presence of Yhwh (16)
a'/ Genealogy: "Adam knew his wife" (17–26)

As for the problem of the origins of the narrative, I suggest starting our inquiry with the end of the composition (just as it would be appropriate in treating the Gospels in the New Testament, for instance). Genesis 4:23–24 registers one of Cain's descendants' poetic sayings, the so-called Song of Lamech. It is probably one of the oldest songs recorded in the Hebrew Bible (along with the core of Exodus 15; Num 21:17–18, 27–30; and Judges 5).

Now the wording of the Lamech poem is most interesting. It poetically sets in parallel the terms "man" (*ʾiš*) and "child" (*yeled*), the latter coming surprisingly instead of the expected "human being" (*ben-ʾadam*).[9] But it is to be noted that *yeled* would refer in this context either to Cain or to Adam, which is certainly not what Lamech had in mind. Second, the text of Gen 4:1 strikingly uses the word "man" instead of the expected "child," as we shall further expound. Thus, in one case (4:1) "man" has displaced "child," and in the other place (4:23d) "child" has displaced "man."

Clearly, within the Cain and Abel story, Lamech's song at the end counterbalances Eve's exclamation at the beginning and creates a nice contrasting *inclusio* with it. Eve's creation is of a man, *ʾiš*; Lamech's destruction is of an *ʾiš*. With Cain's birth at the beginning of the tale, a great expectation has been expressed, the expectation of Eden's restoration. At the end, Eden has never been so remote. Violence has prevailed. Inexorably, the author conducts the story to its fatal dénouement. Cain's or Lamech's world is doomed. Human violence will be paid off with violence.

8. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 1:178–248. See also van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel." About the structure of the literary unit, let us note that the words "Abel" and "brother" appear seven times each; the same is true as regards the word *ʾadamah* (soil, ground).

9. See Gevirtz, "Lamech's Song to His Wives."

So, if Lamech's song is very ancient, then **J**'s later composition in Gen 4:1 reversed the message imbedded in the ancient song's terms—all the more in that Lamech mentions Cain and his potential sevenfold vengeance. Since Gen 4:1–2a may be considered as the beginning of the genealogy that continues in 4:17–22, now interrupted by the story of Cain murdering his brother, I believe that **J** has found an inspiration for his narrative in Lamech's old bardic saying and in a preexisting genealogy of Cain.

The Yahwist as Author

The author of the Cain and Abel myth is the greatest storyteller in the Hebrew Bible.[10] The characters he created in Genesis 2–3, Adam and Eve, or in Genesis 4, Cain and Abel, have become universally known for some two and a half millennia. They have inspired thousands of books, paintings, sculptures, and films. The stories are so vivid and profound that the serious reader feels she will never get to the bottom of them. All has not been said about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and never will. It is like the hoary Oedipus myth that has become in our times the cornerstone of psychoanalysis. John Steinbeck wrote about Gen 4:1–16, "these sixteen verses are a history of mankind in any age or culture or race."[11]

The storyteller is unknown. Scholars call him "J," that is, the Yahwist (in German "Jahwist"). He is so identified because he prefers to use the Name *Yhwh*[12] for God rather than the more general appellation *Elohim*, commonly translated in English as "God." These are the "ABCs" of scholarship concerning **J**. But here the question arises: Why did he continue to use the "tetragrammaton" beyond his story of the creation and the "trial of innocence"? He is now reporting, so to speak, the first-ever murder in history, and he has shown in Gen 3:1b–7 that he did not feel under

10. By "myth" I mean, with Moye, "an independent, closed, symbolically rich narrative about some archetypal character whose story, which takes place in the primeval time of the beginning, represents some universal aspect of the origins or nature of humanity in its relation to the sacred or the divine" ("In the Beginning: Myth and History in Genesis and Exodus"). See also Ellis's definition emphasizing the presentation "in symbolic story-form [of] some transcendental reality or truth intuitively grasped." **J** did "depaganize" ancient myths and "retheologized" them as myths "for his own theological purposes" (Ellis, *The Yahwist*, 142).

11. Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 304.

12. For the meaning of the Name, explicated in Exod 3:14, see LaCocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, 307–61.

any compulsion to use "Yhwh" in all circumstances.[13] In this scene of the dialogue between Eve and the serpent, **J**'s designation of God is Elohim (more generally translated as "God," "the divine"). The avoidance of all promiscuity between Yhwh and a rebellious animality is evident. Now, the literary kinship between Genesis 4 and Genesis 3 could have implied a pure correspondence of Cain with the serpent. Both, for instance, raise impudent questions, like "Did God really say . . . ?" or "Am I my brother's keeper?" Both remain brazenly unmoved by the divine intervention. Both are also cursed and their malediction has something to do with the ground and its dust.

So, **J** could have set Cain's character in parallel with the serpent's, and, consequently, shifted here from his use of "Yhwh" to "Elohim." This did not happen. The pendant of Genesis 3's serpent is not Cain, but "the sin that is crouching at the door" of his heart. Cain will not be presented as a demon; throughout the story his humanity is honored. God speaks to him and with him.[14] God puts a protective shield upon him. And the man Cain is not reduced to a vagrant zombie. He eventually settles and builds the first city.

J's use of "Yhwh" to designate God is fully justified. The "covenantal God" is as concerned with Cain as he is with Abel (to whom, incidentally, he does not speak!). True, Cain is a "man of little faith" (Matt 14:31), but he remains human and, as such, he is not deterministically controlled. Anything remains possible.

J's God is from the beginning in a dialogical and intimate relationship with humanity (see here esp. 4:26). Yhwh is a narrative character, like Adam and Eve, like Cain and Abel. Yhwh soils his hands with mud to shape the first humanity; he strolls in the evening breeze in the Garden of Eden; he inquires about the disappearance of Adam, hidden behind a tree, "Where are you?", or about Abel asking Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" These concretizations are called divine anthropomorphisms, and they are not without theological problems, or even at times raising mis-

13. Nietzsche, comparing (superficially, I must say) the Greek myth of Prometheus and the "Semitic" myth of Adam and Eve, said that the first crime was committed by a man [we may think also of Cain] and the first sin by a woman; *The Birth of Tragedy*, par. 9, in Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche*.

14. True, it is a call to Cain's accountability and therefore a provocative address. But it is not, on God's part, an aloof demand, leaving God untouched. For what Cain must be for the one who is his other, God is for him. See Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," 56: "What I must be for the other, God is for me."

understandings, as we shall show in the body of the present work. A God so immanent may be so close to people as to become suspect of provoking human crimes himself or, at least, disobedience. In which case, Adam is seen as flouted by God, and Cain as a victim of divine capriciousness. Clearly not every traditionist in ancient Israel was ready to run that interpretive risk. Therefore, other biblical writers used names, nouns, and circumlocutions, more fitting God's transcendence—with the reverse risk of severing the ties between Creator and creatures.

J was a daring thinker and a great poet. Like Homer, for instance, **J** left no autobiographical clue describing him as singer of tales. No external evidence points to his personality, only literary characteristics, one of which is that he pushed the human traits of the divine to their limits. As we said, God walks; he looks around; he closes the door of Noah's ark; and he comes down from heaven to see what is going on in the plain of Shinar with the builders of Babel. And **J** himself was also walking with his audience. He did not consider it beneath his poetic ingenuity to "come down" to where his readers were, beings of flesh and blood, moved by impure desires, inclined to rebellion against God, to envy, jealousy, fratricidal impulses—in short, struggling with what Freud called the "id."[15]

J was a singer of tales who keenly observed human nature. The picture he drew of the humans is so true, so penetrating that his purposeful austere economy of words speaks volumes. A few strokes of his brush and here is the Garden of Eden. A few more strokes and the obscene murder of a brother is recounted. We are not told what Cain said to Abel in the field before killing him—although he spoke, that much we know. We do not know how he killed him, how he disposed of his brother's body, how he explained Abel's disappearance to his parents (in contrast to Joseph's brothers reporting his "death" to Jacob), how his parents reacted to the news, or how all of them—slayer and mourners—approached the new (to them) phenomenon of death. The only thing **J** cares to share with us is the core of the event: Cain killed Abel. The rest is up to the reader to imagine.

15. Scheler finely notes that envy is preempted by a mentally "illusory *appropriation* of the good," so that the other person "appears . . . as a 'force' which takes it away from us"; *Ressentiment*, 147 n. 6. Fromm classifies Cain's fury with what he calls "reactive violence," provoked by envy. But the murder of Abel, I think, reflects more Cain's *impotence*. His move is an onslaught against life itself. Fromm says that the impotent one "*takes revenge on life for negating itself to him*"; Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 31 (his emphasis).

The reader must tell the story with the minstrel. Her interpretation is respected: not imposed by **J**, it becomes an integral part of the tale itself.

The author's sobriety is an open invitation to the reader to come at the story as a creative collaboration, but the interpreter sometimes goes astray. In fact, some scholars have abusively minimized what was already so condensed in the tale. Distorting the pithiness of **J**'s exposition, they have blotted out Abel the innocent as superfluous.[16] Then the story is not about an onslaught against innocence, but an exclusive and difficult exchange between God and a murderous man named Cain.[17]

Date of Composition

After more than a century of scholarly consensus in attributing **J**'s work to the time of the Davidic monarchy (ca. 950 BCE), the problem of dating this material has been recently raised anew. Such a stance is today rightly questioned, as I did myself in my study on the myth of Adam and Eve.[18] In agreement with other modern critics' conclusions, I also arrive at a late (exilic or postexilic) dating. As is well known, the striking characters of the poet's narrative do not reappear in the Hebrew Bible in spite of their intrinsic appeal, already a sign of the probable late composition of **J**. In the body of this essay, furthermore, I shall throw into relief the exile of Cain "east of Eden" (4:16), that is, toward Mesopotamia.[19]

The curious absence of the Conquest tradition in the Yahwist's saga provides a further clue. As a matter of fact, it seems evident that this epic—written allegedly under king David's battles on multiple fronts and in the wake of the king's military prowess—bypasses the alleged he-

16. See below, in chapter 4, the section on "The Psychology of Cain."

17. Such ignorance of the victim makes one think of Ellison's *The Invisible Man*.

18. See LaCocque, *The Trial of Innocence*. In the controversy between Rendtorff and Van Seters on the composition of Genesis (and particularly of Genesis 1–11), I side with Van Seters. See Rendtorff, *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*; and Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*; and his response to Rendtorff in "The Yahwist as Theologian? A Response." Now, in a recent article, Christoph Levin argues that **J**'s narratives, including the primeval history (Genesis 2–11), were "only at a later stage . . . linked to form the continuous narrative we have today." It may be, he says, that **P** constitutes the basic document into which "non-Priestly narratives have been inserted at a later point." "The Yahwist: The Earliest Editor in the Pentateuch," 209–10.

19. Moye strongly emphasizes the "main" Pentateuchal theme of "exile and return" (sixth century BCE). About **J**'s narratives, he writes, "In each of these narrative sequences [i.e., Gen 12:1–9, 10, 11–16; 12:17—13:4], there is a distinct pattern based on the motif of exile and return"; "In the Beginning," 595.

roic origins of the land occupation and its territorial claims. Now, the post-exilic Israelite literature shows little interest in the deuteronomistic Conquest traditions reported for example in the book of Joshua. This is arguably due to the irrelevance of triumphalism at a time when Israel (or what was left of it) had been so utterly crushed by the Babylonian empire. **J**'s disregard for the Conquest of Canaan (*kibbuš kena'an*) corresponds, as well, with his universalistic ideology.[20]

True, some respected scholars are convinced that **J** wrote an account of the Conquest that was lost or deleted by the final redactors of the Pentateuch. But then the question is why any traditionist would deliberately destroy such a crucial elaboration on a "glorious" series of events. It does not make much sense. Preferable is the opinion of Hans Walter Wolff, who speaks of "a striking decline of interest in the conquest."[21] It is not that **J** ignored the theme of the Conquest (see Gen 27:39–40; Numbers 14; 21), but, most probably based on his convictions, he refrained to harp on the topic. The traditionists otherwise included so many duplicate narratives that this point militates against the exclusion of a whole chapter that the Yahwist would have written on the Conquest allegedly to avoid redundancy.

If David J. A. Clines is right that Genesis 1–11 "is heard in exile as a story of God and Israel" with "a word of hope to the exiles,"[22] it is clear that the exile in Babylon was sternly understood as being on the pattern of Cain's wandering but marked with a divine sign that guaranteed his survival and even his eventual settlement in a city built for this purpose.[23]

The vexing problem whether the characters are **J**'s creation belongs to the inquiry about when **J** wrote his stories. It is hard to arrive at an unequivocal answer. He certainly used preexisting sources as we already intimated above, but his creativity is evident at every step. Gerhard von Rad also thinks that **J** found disparate narrative traditions already extant, which he sewed together. At a minimum, the Yahwist's literary contribution is their coordination. As they now stand, these traditions "serve only one purpose, which is to show how all the harm in the world comes from

20. See Gen 3:20; 8:21–22; 12:3. Let us note that **J**'s universalism corresponds with the same broad vision of a Deutero-Isaiah, for instance. Both are roughly contemporary. See also Psalm 82 (esp. v. 8).

21. Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Yahwist," 133.

22. Clines, "Theme in Genesis 1–11," 308.

23. Regarding Gen 4:15, Speiser refers to Exod 13:16; 28:38; Deut 6:8; 11:18; and Ezek 9:4, 6; *Genesis*, 31.

sin."[24] In the story of Cain and Abel, using as it does an ancient genealogy (of Cain and of Seth), **J** displays one of his innate gifts: his ability to weave together traditional threads into one cloth, and with a purpose different from the original.

One of the author's aims is to display a worldview according to which Israel's God is at work in human history from the very beginning. Before there was a entity called Israel, there was an interconnection of God and humanity at large. The first chapters of Genesis are dedicated to that theological principle. True, **J**'s use of the Name Yhwh instead of the more general and universal Elohim to designate God needed to be compensated on this score by the composer's universalism. It is also the motivation behind **J**'s closing the Cain and Abel story with the grandiose declaration, "then people started to call on the name of Yhwh" [not just Elohim] (4:26).

This evidently implies a certain conception, not only of the world in general, but of Israel in particular. National isolationism is defeated by **J**'s worldview. The Yahwist's understanding of "chosen people" is not static but dynamic. One is not chosen, one becomes chosen (by choosing God). Seth, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses do not belong to a constituted chosen people, but they certainly constitute themselves as the chosen people.[25] So does Abel in the **J** story we are dealing with here. We can be assured that not everyone in historical Israel was pleased with this **J**'s conception. This is especially true if he wrote during or after the Babylonian exile.[26] As we shall see in the course of this study, **J**'s narrative is at times polemical.

Authorial Omniscience

The story of Cain and Abel is just that—a story. The bard felt free to imagine not only the action of the tale but also the dialogues (or their absence, see 4:8) of the characters, including God. Such freedom on the

24. Von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, 65.

25. It is within this framework that it becomes understandable why the call to Abraham in Ur of Chaldea beacons to all nations of the earth that they may also constitute themselves as the chosen (by God) people (see Gen 12:2–3). More needs to be said on this important topic in **J**'s view; see chapter 3 below, "The Theological Dimension."

26. The interrelation of narrative and genealogy in Genesis 4 points into the same direction; see Moye, "In the Beginning." On the genealogical element of the story, see below, chapter 5.

part of **J** explains his choice either to explain certain things or to leave them unexplained. For example, we know neither why God had no regard for Cain's offering nor how Cain learned about it. The only thing we are made privy to is what it implied for both Cain and Abel. As stated earlier, this narrative gap has led some scholars to conclude that the deity acts capriciously—even sadistically—toward Cain. For what reason, they do not say. Pure divine arbitrariness? Then, **J**'s admirable sobriety is turned against him for not being more explicit.

Now, it is clear that **J** builds his narrative against a preexisting background of certain faith principles that he takes for granted. An example is provided with the motif of Cain and Abel worshipping God by means of a sacrifice. **J** felt no compulsion to justify the anachronism of the brothers offering a (thanksgiving?) sacrifice to the deity before the ordinance of the Law much later (at least according to the fictional chronology of **J**'s story set in the antediluvian era). The same is true of ethical principles presented as fundamental: murder and adultery, for instance, are sins against the deity (see Gen 34:7; 39:9; 2 Sam 12, esp. 12:13[rape]).[27] In a similar way, I would say, **J** felt no necessity to explain that God is free to agree more with some offerings than with others.[28] **J** assumed that his audience would *not* conclude that the deity was acting capriciously but would rather question either the kind of sacrifice disregarded by God or the integrity of the of the one offering it. No ancient commentator, Jewish or Christian, missed that point. From the time of the incipient biblical traditions down to the present post-modern period, there has been a faithful confidence that God is *not* capricious—a term that fits pagan gods; not even Job believed that he is. God is unfathomable, yes; erratic, no. It belongs to a false conception of God to apply a logic according to which if God does not shield the innocent from being slaughtered, he has the power to do so but does not (perhaps by whim).[29]

Moreover, a common feature in ancient Near Eastern stories is the avoidance of psychological analyses. Facts only are reported in their "bareness." It is not that such an almost systematic understatement would be without evoking in the reader a psychological feeling, however. From the non-sentimental report-like dialogue with Cain initiated by God, we

27. One should note this "unexpressed assumption of the existence of a moral law operative from the beginning of time"; Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 31.

28. See **J** in Exod 33:19 (see Rom 9:6–33; 1 Cor 1:17–31); Gen 25:23; 1 Sam 16:7.

29. In the section on "Violence" below, I raise the problem of theodicy.

appropriately conclude that Cain looks like someone unaffected by his own crime: "Am I my brother's keeper?"[30] When he expresses some distress shortly after that, it is not because of his monstrous act, but because of his chastisement: "My punishment is too heavy." His turning to the very judge of his crime for clemency and protection sets a paradoxical diptych with the blood of his brother crying out for justice to God. There is indeed no one else to turn to.[31]

There are precious few windows into Cain's soul. It is not even certain how we should interpret them. It would be hard to construe his complaint as repentance (as the *Genesis Rabbah* does). He is condemned to wander endlessly; but what his thoughts and his feelings are is not stated. A thousand and one novels may be written on the model of *East of Eden* to fill the gap, but they will all be speculative. Erich Auerbach has eloquently emphasized this phenomenon.[32] It fits well the Hebrew short story, which is characterized by a minimum number of personages and the bare facts affecting them.

What is true of the human characters in the story is also true of God. There is here no authorial attempt at "psychologizing" God, and thus **J**'s theology is tightly restrained. True, God acts and speaks, but what motivates him is told only in the most basic way. We can, nonetheless, readily ascertain with the "cloud of witnesses" that he is moved by love and justice; but is there also, perhaps, a dark side of God? **J** may have been too shy on this score. An exceptionally gifted minstrel such as him no doubt could have reconstructed God's feelings narratively. And at times he does, like when Yhwh vents some uneasiness and asks, "Where are you?" in Gen 3:9, or again when interrogating Cain, "What have you done?" in 4:10. The divine soliloquies (Gen 3:22; 8:21 for instance) belong to this category of texts. **J**'s omniscience indeed goes occasionally so far as to

30. The psychoanalyst Willard Gaylin says, "[W]hat one does, one's behavior, is a better definition of the self than one's inner feelings"; *Hatred*, 134. Paul W. Kahn says, "Because power and powerlessness can coexist in the same person, one can be evil and yet see oneself as a victim. Suffering from the terror of powerlessness, the subject asserts a power to master death"; *Out of Eden*, 17.

31. Freud said, "[For the aggressive instinct] injury or annihilation of the object is a matter of indifference"; "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," 139. Let us note that there is a strange irony in the oxymoron of the dead foe finding his voice at this point. Elias Canetti in his study of crowds rightly states, "When [the enemies] have all been cut down, [they are] silenced forever. The stillest crowd is the crowd of the enemy dead"; *Crowds and Power*, 38.

32. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 3–23. See chapter 4 below, "The Psychological Dimension."

know the intimate thinking of God: in Genesis 2 already, God reflects to himself, "It is not good that man be alone" (2:18).

Reading Genesis 4 without immoderate skepticism will require our provisional suspension of suspicion and our readiness to be disoriented by the text so as to be perhaps reoriented by it. A theological reflection on the "dark side" of God will have to be shelved for a while as it is preempted by some issues to be dealt with first.

A Matter of Temporality

J has created a new paradigmatic narrative, this time about Cain and Abel. Born to Adam and Eve, they guarantee the survival of the human race.[33] On the model of the Adam and Eve story, **J** again uses his amazing skill of understatement and economy of means. Brevity is characteristic of **J**'s style. His narrative displays a "tremendous concentration."[34] He uses parataxis (the man knew Eve his wife / she was pregnant / she gave birth to Cain / . . . she was again pregnant with his brother Abel / Abel was a shepherd / Cain was a ground tiller / etc.). As Auerbach states (about the same paratactic construction in Gen 1:3):

> The sublime in this sentence from Genesis is not contained in a magnificent display of rolling periods nor in the splendor of abundant figures of speech but in the impressive brevity which is in such contrast to the immense content and which for that very reason has a note of obscurity which fills the listener with a shuddering awe. It is precisely the absence of causal connectives, the naked statement of what happens—the statement which replaces deduction and comprehension by an amazed beholding that does not even seek to comprehend—which gives the sentence its grandeur.[35]

The story works by allusion and implication. Paul Grawe states, "Implication is the basis of artistic meaning just as exact statement is the basis of discursive meaning."[36] But then **J** comes with a deceptively simple

33. Voegelin states that "the paradigmatic narrative is, in the historical form, the equivalent of the myth in the cosmological form"; *Israel and Revelation*, 124. H. Richard Niebuhr speaks of "an image by means of which all the occasions of personal and common life become intelligible," so that it "furnishes the practical reason with a starting point for the interpretation of past, present, and future history"; *The Meaning of Revelation,* 97.

34. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 41–42, 192.

35. Ibid., 110.

36. Grawe, *Comedy in Space, Time, and in Imagination*, 20.

narrative, thus perpetuating the camouflage over the extreme complexity of the preceding tale on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The profoundest doctrines are told in "childish" narratives, like a grandfather telling a story to his grandchild, or like a Hasidic tale. No anthropologist will ever go "deeper" than **J** in Genesis 2–3 and 4.

As Adam and Eve represent the whole of humanity throughout history, so too are Cain and Abel specimens of humankind. As Genesis 2 and 3 are not to be read only diachronically but also synchronically (Genesis 3 does *not* supersede Genesis 2), so Cain and Abel can be said to be the *figurae* of the human condition. Each human being is both Abel and Cain, that is, the incarnate poem of innocence and its slaughter.[37] True, the narrative of Cain and Abel is about the onslaught against innocence, yet it unwinds against the background of the trial of innocence, as described by **J** in Genesis 2–3.[38]

J's dialectical dual identity confronts everyone. The human being is this and also that. Not in equal terms, however, but always with the primacy of one of the two, while innocence is primary. Sin is "at the door" of original innocence, ready to change "Abel" into "Cain." In short, we are not born guilty but innocent. It takes Cain's move of "not doing well" to open the door to the *rabiṣum*, the demon in the background of the animalistic description of sin in 4:7.[39] Our guilt is thus a failure of responsibility.

Abel can become Cain, and Cain can become Abel. There is between the doppelgängers an identity that is original. At the beginning of the tale, when the two brothers are grownups—let alone when they were born—they are interchangeable. Abel is Cain's brother, and both mimetically work the same act of worship, as in a mirror. Although Cain is the elder and Abel the younger—a motif imbued with importance in the tale, as we shall see—there is initially nothing to set them mutually apart, but perhaps their discrete occupations.

37. It is how the story of Cain and Abel is paradigmatic. The massacres of Columbine and Virginia Tech, for instance, are in narrative continuity with the fratricide recounted in Genesis 4. This *continuum* is in reference to a common life experience. It is this paradigmatic dimension that critical reflection must put in relief and thus "liberate the narrative from any character of occupation for child's nurses," as Robert Musil says; *Tagebücher*, 778).

38. In the twelfth century "Mystère d'Adam," for instance, the story of Adam and Eve is carried over to Abel's murder. The division of the biblical text in chapters and verses is, of course, a late development.

39. See below "A Crux Interpretum."

Yet, when it comes to the balance between the two, once their personal existential choice is posited, their equality remains only in the sociological realm. We must note, with Auerbach (speaking of Simon Peter in the scene of denial) the (relatively) "low social station" of the *dramatis personae* introduced by the Yahwist. Cain and Abel are "average." One is a tiller of the ground, the other is a shepherd. No chivalry or heroic deeds are expected from them. Calling them "heroes" would not make much sense; but each of them, like Peter in the Gospel of Mark, is "the image of man in the highest and deepest and most tragic sense." Auerbach insists on such stories' incompatibility with "the sublime style of classical antique literature." He writes,

> For the great and sublime events in the Homeric poems take place far more exclusively and unmistakably among the members of a ruling class; and these are far more untouched in their heroic elevation than are the Old Testament figures . . . [F]rom the very first, in the Old Testament stories, the sublime, tragic, and problematic take shape precisely in the domestic and commonplace: scenes such as those between Cain and Abel, between Noah and his sons . . . are inconceivable in Homeric style.[40]

The myth of Cain and Abel is playing on two levels of understanding: a political-social-cultural level of interpretation,[41] and a psychological-anthropological one. In addition, from the point of view of its temporality, the story requires that we read it along the changing nature of the diachronic line while respecting its concomitant synchronism.

Diachronically, we are presented with a neat succession of events along an evolutionary development that appears logical: the two brothers offer a sacrifice to God; one is welcome, the other is not; Cain becomes angry and kills his brother Abel. At this point, the limelight focuses entirely upon Cain and there is a divine statement that eventually leaves Cain speechless, a feature probably to be interpreted as indicating Cain's pouting and continued rage.[42]

40. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 22.

41. As a matter of fact, myths often derive from their socio-cultural environment albeit the events represented proceed from diverse historical complexes that are yoked together into a fictional unity. See pages 26ff. below.

42. On anger as a prelude to murder, see also Gen 34:7; Wis 10:3. Philo (*Q.G.* 1:77) says that, among the diverse chastisements meted out on Cain, one was "upon the tongue and the organs of speech, for being silent about things that should be said and for saying things that should be kept silent"; quoted by Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 95).

Synchronically, however, there is no "before" and no "after" in a folktale.[43] Cain's offering comes from someone who "does not do well" (v. 7). His fratricide is demonstration, not of a "temporary insanity"—in which, for instance, Hamlet found an easy excuse for killing Polonius—but of his murderous drive. Cain *can* "master it," but he does not.[44]

Commentators have sometimes pointed to the fact that, when Cain killed his brother, there was not yet any law prohibiting murder. The crime of murder is not explicitly forbidden until Gen 9:6 (**P**, the Priestly literary source). Then it is the first time that legislation is explicit about the shedding of human blood. True, but as I have already pointed out, before regarding the brothers' offerings without their move being regulated by law, the reader must distinguish between the ostensible temporality of the tale and its actual setting in life (that is, in the sixth century BCE). Moreover, we shall note the difference of conception between **J**'s reference to God as the only judge and punisher in Genesis 4, and **P** attributing capital punishment to human beings: "by the human shall his [the murderer's] blood be shed" (Gen 9:6). **P**, however, is crystal-clear on the rationale for prohibiting murder: human beings are in the image of God, a feature that constitutes the very foundation of their humanity.

Incidentally, Cain is not slaughtered (by God or "by the human"), but he is punished (by exile). Otherwise, there would be a tacit condoning of the crime. The culprit's punishment (according to either **J** or **P**) is

43. Westermann writes, "One should not apply criteria belonging to historical thought patterns to the presentation of the primeval events"; *Genesis 1–11*, 311. Diachronically, for example, Cain's only contemporaries are his parents and his brother. But he fears "anyone" after his crime, and he is able to find a wife, to build a city, etc. When banished, he goes to dwell in the city of Nod (= Wandering). Fretheim rightly sees in this the "collaps[ing of] the distance between the 'then' of the story and the 'now' of the reader (for instance, 2:24)"; *God and World in the Old Testament*, 77).

44. First John 3:12 says, "his [Cain's] own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous" (see Heb 11:4 and 12:24). In the present work, I take exception to Westermann's rejection of the interpretation of both late Judaism and the New Testament according to which Cain's offering came from an evil man. This ancient interpretation is indeed textually debatable, but its intuition is correct. If we approach the text from the point of view of modern literary criticism and read it synchronically as well as diachronically, we gain a new appreciation for the traditional understanding. This ancient confirmation is one more argument in favor of my interpretation here. Cf. *Hamlet*, act 3, sc. 3, ll. 37–38, where King Claudius calls his own "offense": "the primal eldest curse . . . A brother's murder!" In act 5, sc. 1, Cain's murder is called "the first foul murder." True, Cain is no Hamlet! But King Claudius's character may be modeled on Cain. (Will there be advocates for Claudius among the post-modern theorists?)

strikingly not revenge. It is for fairness sake; it responds to Abel's blood clamoring for justice.

Abel's blood has a voice transcending time, not a taboo power of its own as it would in many religious worldviews. God is the one who now and evermore heeds the voice. There is no trace here of ancestors' alleged power over the living. In fact, the spilled blood of Abel crying for justice, a need for vindication not extinguished by his demise, does echo another shout, although an oxymoronic silent one. For Cain's is "an act of murder screaming for help, a murder screaming for recognition" to borrow the words of Michael Eigen.[45]

God's address to murderous Cain shows that both screams are heeded here and now. As re-readers of the tale, we know that the latter ends on a different, hopeful note: "people began to call on the Name of Yhwh." But the divine discourse to the "fallen" human precedes this appeal to God. In the relationship, God always comes first. He wraps the human, front and back, like the moving pillar of cloud in the desert of Israel's wandering (Exod 14:19).

45. Eigen, *Rage*, 109.