

# THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: PART III, SECTION I

## THE EFFECTS OF FAITH AND SIN IN THE ERA BEFORE NOAH

I. Genesis chapters 4 through 11 describe the sinfulness of the human race, with God's mercy and some faithfulness shining through, in order to set up the call of Abraham through whom God would establish His people.

A. The chapters describe both good and evil, but the good never prevails against the evil. This prevalence of evil and decadence shows why God called Abraham.

1. Except for the limiting of human life, the call of Noah and the Flood, and the scattering of language, God continuously involve Himself in events. He more lets people show their own evil and acts to limit it. It will be with Abraham that God fully intervenes to bring out His holiness on earth.

2. There is one solution after another, some from God (e.g., the calling of Enoch, the Flood and the covenant with Noah, some from men against God (e.g., the building of cities by Lamech, the power of the Nephillim, and the tower of Babel.) None of them really solves the problems. Rather the false plans of humans lead to God's show of power limiting them; but until Abraham even God's solutions do not eliminate evil.

- There is a great skepticism of human greatness. The peoples who engage in seemingly heroic ventures (e.g., building cities and towers, boasting of strength, being great hunters) are opposed to God. It is the families, especially of Seth and Shem that God blesses to be the foundation of human society.

3. These accounts give several geneologies, or tables, of peoples. They may not be literalistically true as a matter of biology, but they do represent connections between the peoples that the ancient Jews knew. By their own accounts they are not meant to be comprehensive, covering all peoples. The just series of peoples have ages attached to their names, while those rebelling, or seemingly neutral, against God do not. Compare Gen. 5:1-28, 11:10-26 with Gen. 4:17-22, 10:1-21. The emphasis is on describing how the people of God came to be.

- The ages typically decline from the beginning to the end, but not with perfect consistency. There is an implication of the graces of God diminishing, but the fact that an individual does not live as long as his predecessors does not indicate a lack

of holiness. For example, in the first genealogy, Enoch lives the shortest time of earth, but he is plainly the most holy. See Gen. 5:21-24. The lifespan may be symbolic, but it also may reflect, not how long the person lived physically on earth, but how long his influence lasted. Thus, for example, the country of Israel is often called Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel) indicating that the whole country is, in a sense, a continuation of him. See Ps. 135:4, 147:19; Is. 10:21, 27:6-9, 41:14, 49:5; Jer. 46:27-28; Lam. 2:2-3; Mic. 5:7. Likewise, the kingship is sometimes called simply David. Ps. 89:20-38; Ez. 34:23-24, 37:24-35; Hos. 3:5.

B. Thus, after Adam and Eve apparently repent, there is still the fratricide of Cain against Abel, and the people of Cain rising up. There is also the more just son Seth, but they are not able to prevail, as the "sons of God" mix with the "sons of man" of produce the evil race of Nephillim.

C. God then sends the Flood, while saving Noah and his family. After the flood destroys the known world, He swears an oath with Noah, confirming the value of human life, which is still in the image of God.

1. Unfortunately, however, there is strife right from the beginning with one of his sons, Ham, plotting against him after finding him drunk and naked.

2. All three of Noah's sons have numerous descendants, who populate the known world, with Shem the preferred one and the ancestor of the Israelites.

D. Matters go downhill again as the people plot to build a great tower in Babel to unite them and soar to the heavens. God puts an end to that project by confusing the peoples' language and thus scattering them.

- Chapter 10, however, ends with a note of hope as the line of Shem continues on, leading to Abraham.

II. Chapter 4 describes the birth of the first two of Adam and Eve's children, Cain and Abel, the murder of Abel by Cain, and a renewal under the third child Seth.

A. The account begins with the birth of Cain and Abel and their respective occupations, as farmer and shepherd.

1. It appears that Adam and Eve are back in good terms with God, for they thank God for the gift of Cain, whose name indicates "to produce" or "to own." Abel almost seems secondary.
2. The different occupations may simply reflect different states in life, and the conflict that sometimes come from them. It would seem that Cain is the more organized one, for in the ancient world it took more organization to farm, with the consequent setting aside and tending of land, that to guide animals from place to place. Because farmers were more settled and shepherds nomadic, farmers tended to be more respected. Thus Cain would probably have been considered the more "advanced" one of the pair.

B. Paradoxically, the context of the murder is a desire to offer sacrifice to God.

1. Noteworthy, Cain and then Abel intuitively decided to make sacrifices to God, who had not commanded them. The desire to make sacrifices to join heaven and earth seems to be a natural one. It is only with Seth in verse 26 that people start invoking God by name.

- Until after the golden calf scandal, God only commanded limited sacrifices from the Israelite, such as the three great feast, the consecration of the priests, and the building of the tent and then Temple and burning incense therein. It is when the people insist on false worship that God demands more sacrifices.

2. The text does not quite explain why God accepts Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's. It may well be that Cain's sacrifice was offered with an impure heart. The prophets would later comment on the uselessness of sacrifices without conversion. See, e.g., Is. 1:11-20; Micah 6:6-8. It could also be that Cain's sacrifice was not the best of his produce, while Abel's was. Given that Cain was the first to think of offering a sacrifice, it may be that he was more advanced, and thus needed more instruction. In any case, God encourages Cain to keep trying.

3. Cain is filled with resentment at the rejection of the sacrifice. But, instead of simply refusing any sacrifice and going on his way, he turns against Abel. Abel seemingly reminds him of his own failures. The letter to the Hebrews will

cite Abel as a model of righteousness. See Heb. 11:4-5.

### C. Cain's punishment shows God's mercy and justice.

1. As with Adam and Even, God comes to Cain not with an allegation, but a question, giving him the first chance to explain himself.
2. Cain's response "Am I my brother's keeper?" identifies that attitude of callousness with the attitude of a murderer. Part of the idea here is that mere indifference to the suffering of others is not neutral, but in the end is taking the side of murderers. There can be no complete neutrality. See, e.g., Matt. 25:31-46.
3. The punishment is more of a statement than a sentence. The murder itself has cursed the ground and make it rebel against the crime. The ground itself cries out for vengeance. Part of the idea is that there is a natural order in creation according to which all disorder must be punished. There is an old saying, "God always forgives; people sometimes forgive; nature never forgives."
  - Cain, therefore, must leave his farms, and take up the nomadic life of Abel.
4. Cain exaggerates his punishment by saying that he must leave God's presence, which God never said. It is common that sin leads people to reject God, even though God has not rejected the sinner.
  - The text indicates that there are numerous other people by this time, for Cain is afraid of being murdered. This and many other passages indicates that the text is not meant as a comprehensive account of early humanity
5. God, however, shows mercy to Cain by giving him a mark to protect him from others. God's love cannot be defeated by sin.

6. Paradoxically, Cain settles in the land of Nod, which means wandering. From the fact that Cain later founds a city, it appears that he is both a wanderer and yet tries to create a stable society.

III. The parallel lines of Cain and Seth then grow, with Cain's line emphasizing power and accomplishment, and Abel's line emphasizing the family and heritage, with the latter one more in keeping with God's plans.

A. Verses 17 to 24 describe seven generations from Cain to the establishment of organized shepherding, music, and ironworks.

1. There is no record of how long anyone lives, indicating that it is not of much concern to this society.

2. Instead, the emphasis is on power, the building of the first city by Cain, and Lamech's boast that he would avenge any injury multi-fold. There is no record of such injuries; rather, he seems almost to want them so as to justify violence.

- Lamech taking two wives also indicates his desire for power, as well as the likely beginning of a war-like society that would result in battles that leave fewer adult men than women, a cause of polygamy.

3. With Lamech's sons being the founders of those who dwell in tents and raise cattle, those who make music, and those who forge iron and bronze, his line would seem to be the more advanced. But it is cursed; the seventh generation, which symbolically would be the one that represents Sabbath, is geared to doing things. The industries had become the new Sabbath.

B. Instead, the line blessed by God is that of Seth, the next child of Adam and Eve.

1. Eve's response to this birth is grateful, as with Cain, but more humble before God. Rather than say that she has produced a child with God's help, she recognized that Seth is above all a gift from God.

2. It is only with Seth's first child that true prayer begins again. Becoming a parent apparently brings Seth more in relationship with God, a common phenomenon throughout history.

C. Chapter 5 then traces Seth's line. In one sense, there is a similarity to Cain's line, for the numbers and names are similar. But there are critical differences, indicating the holiness of Seth's line.

1. Seth's line continues for nine generations until Lamech, with names very similar to that of Cain's line. The superficial similarities, however, only accentuate the differences between the two.

2. First, Seth is much more connected to Adam. Unlike the case with Cain and even Abel, the text says that Adam begot Seth in "his image and likeness." There is a sense of a new creation here, the image of God, given to Adam although marred by sin, is more reflected in Seth.

3. Second, the exact years of each person's lifetime is recorded, indicating the importance of ancestors. It is not clear whether the long lifespans, usually over 900 years, are meant to be the physical life of the person, or the effect of their heritage, i.e., how long they are remembered and honored. Early Jewish thought had no teaching about a resurrection, and thus the continuation of one's memory through children was considered crucial.

4. The ages each of the patriarch's lives indicates that the nine listed from Adam to Lamech were all alive until Lamech was 56. There is a continuity of the prior generations. With Cain's line by contrast, Lamech boasts that he is greater than his fathers.

- When Adam, Seth, and Enoch, the three most devout figures, die, things start going downhill with the Nephellim. After all nine of these figures die, and only then, God sends the flood.

5. Furthermore, there are clearly holy figures in this line.
  - a. First, Adam himself seems to have handed on the idea of worship to Seth, who picked up on it.
  - b. Second, Enoch does not die, but is taken by God. In the three centuries before Christ, there was an extensive literature about Enoch, including the visions of the Book of Enoch, which speaks of many beliefs, such as angelology, and the Book of Parables, which describes the coming of the Son of Man after a cataclysmic era. In the Bible, the Sirach and Hebrews hold up Enoch as a model of prayer, and the letter of Jude quotes from the Book of Parables. See Sir. 44:16; Heb. 11:5; Jude 14-15.
  
6. In contrast to the violent Lamech of Cain's line, the Lamech here lives for 777 years, the Sabbath repeated three times, indicating his holiness.
  
  
7. The entire line leads to Noah, whom God finds just in the midst of a wicked generation.