

# **Cain and Abel: An Old Story Raising Today's Issues**

**MATERIAL FOR LOCAL  
CHURCH PEOPLE TO GET  
THEIR TEETH INTO**

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# 1. Introduction

This study began as regular work within a local church and its community. It took its first form in Sunday worship. Worship is where each week our lives and work are brought into intentional interaction with our faith and with the Bible text that feeds our faith.

## Worship is where Life and Faith Interact

As Christians within our community, we ask questions of our faith and we bring our concerns with us to Sunday worship in the hope that we will receive some kind of divine insight. This is faith's way in Christian congregations wherever they are located. This has been the life of faith for peoples of faith throughout the centuries.

- Can our faith heritage offer resources for life in the world we encounter today?
- Are there life-enhancing points of connection between the issues we face and the ancient texts of traditional faith?

We keep asking these questions and, so long as our worship gives at least some specific answers to the issues we're facing, the general answer to these questions is "yes". Engaging with the Bible can and does give us food for thought and resources for living. Engaging with the Bible can be for us a conversation that includes God, a conversation in which *we get to hear God speaking to us*.

So join us if you will on this journey that began in a particular district and worship place. It is a place where we pit our lives against the biblical text that propels our faith, where we ask that text to speak in God's voice words of comfort and insight, courage and encouragement for our situation. We are persistent in both wanting to deal with our concerns and in being convinced that the Bible does have something to say. But we're also unsure of how we can know what it is saying, given the differences it contains, in time and space, in culture, in knowledge, in way of life. We're not experts in the field of biblical scholarship, but we need to have ways to draw on insights from studies into the history, rhetoric, context and themes of the Bible's many texts. Our local situation with its distinctive concerns remains our primary focus, but the wider world of scholars promises the benefit of greater breadth of perspective and depth of understanding. Bible reading needs to be a form of Action-Reflection, starting with the practical life we're living, reflecting on it, asking questions and getting information from elsewhere, then leading back to action with a renewed sense of purpose.

But is there a problem here? This process calls for interaction between the University and the local church, but is that feasible?

- What do biblical scholarship and a local congregation have to do with each other?
- Don't they live in different worlds?

The work of scholars can seem alien with its technical language and the precision of its arguments. Abstract theory appears to be a million miles away off from the pressing concerns of daily existence. The impression among many of the faithful of the church is that, even though these people may be experts in speaking about the Bible, what they are saying is simply irrelevant, at which point the conversation closes (and shrewd clergy keep quiet about their academic interests). What is more, even if preachers do mine the relevance within scholarly research, they may question the value of presenting

interpretations of texts so different from traditional understanding that they cause uproar among faithful listeners. Perhaps there is a separate category called 'simple faith' or 'practical faith', with which scholarship has little contact. But to top it all there is this question: have local preachers any chance of keeping up with constantly changing biblical research?

But even if we didn't bother with the views of experts in the biblical field, major questions for weekly worship would remain.

- What is the best way to interpret texts to be read in congregational worship?
- How does one decide?
- What counts as a reliable guide for faithful reading?

There is such an enormous choice of resources available, through church denominational agencies, para-church groups, internet sites and book retailers, for example, that it is not clear how one is to choose among these and choose well. Maybe it is a case of following instinct or theological preference or what seems to suit one's congregation. As a person who regularly leads Sunday worship, I am concerned that it might be simply my preferences, my theology that dictates the direction of biblical interpretation. Even the possibility that it is the preferences or theology of our group alarms me. How can we follow Christ when we are using ourselves as the guide?

So...

- What does one say week by week at church and say it with integrity?
- Where are we to find the best words to express insight and perspective, comfort and challenge for the faithful followers of the Christian way who come looking for something to help them?

For people at worship clearly seek some kind of signpost, or lighthouse, or even just a glimpse in imagination of the horizon of hope their faith promises them.

So to this issue:

## **Why Use the Old Testament in Christian Worship?**

I have heard both sides of the coin on this issue:

*'What we need is more attention given to the Old Testament readings in the lectionary' and 'There is too much emphasis on the Old Testament in the church nowadays'.*

### **Some Responses:**

1. Discoveries made in relation to the Old Testament in terms of how we read texts will be relevant to whatever Bible, or part of the Bible, we read. The Old Testament offers territory aplenty in which to **hone our God-listening skills**.
2. The Old Testament helps develop **the discipline of respecting a text in its differences and its difficulties**. In contrast, the New Testament presents the core of the Christian faith by containing the stories and proclamation of Christ that are agreed to be definitive and united. It can give the impression of immediate access to truth about Christ, without a need to dig deeper. But that leaves out the crucial question of faith - who is this Christ for those who read the text and for how they live their lives.

With the New Testament, the temptation for Christians is to read it too simply or too dogmatically. With the Old Testament, there are other people who read the same or similar texts as their own holy book. To expect an Old Testament text to speak transparently and definitively in Christian terms amounts to disparaging the people who read it in a different way. The existence of Judaism reminds us that the Bible is many books and these books contain the stories of different peoples. There are many stories and many threads of stories, and they are so diverse that they are sometimes conflicting. When we read these texts we cannot expect them to speak without variation or ambiguity and we would do well to approach the New Testament with similar openness and readiness to grapple with the depths within the text and let ourselves be surprised by God.

3. Put simply, **the God of the Old Testament is the God of Jesus Christ.** Its stories reveal the God Jesus pledged his life and loyalty to. He loved this God who is presented through such a variety of threads of memory that they are sometimes at odds with one another. *He* could love and trust a God whose holiness means God is always one step ahead of characterisation, who is slow to anger yet gets very fired up over injustice and wrongdoing, who is filled with compassion yet ensures the consequences hit home to wrongdoers. Following Jesus means we cannot gloss over these conflicting realities in his God. Indeed the same ambiguities and conflicts are present in the New Testament God, the God shown to us in the shape of Christ. The New Testament witness to the life of Jesus is also multi-threaded and involves a compilation of diverse memories. Christian proclamation about Jesus contains the same ambivalences: peace and justice, compassion and righteousness, welcome and judgment. Christians can learn from the Old Testament how to hear God's word in the midst of the differing voices and perspectives contained also in the New Testament, and therefore know Christ better.

So

### **keep it whole and keep it holy**

It is a pluralistic world we live in now: many peoples, cultures, faiths, world-views. On the one side there's the trap of treating differences as cause to be at odds: 'us' and 'them', each using the other to identify what they stand for and stand against. Such is a polarised society. On the other side there's the trap of treating differences as reason to retreat into one's own space, with family or 'like' group, and having as little as possible to do with others. Such is a fragmented society.

But we don't have to fall into these traps. Like the Bible, society contains different strands and perspectives. Like the Bible, society can hold these together without losing strength. Indeed each gains strength from the diversity. This is the "wholeness" of each, and the holiness of allowing the whole to remain intact.

Being brave and engaging with it on its terms as well as our own. Like any good conversation between people who respect each other as is where is.

For all communities tackling the realities of pluralism and learning to live in multi-cultural respect for one another, the Bible is both a minefield to tread carefully through and a treasure trove to mine.

And there is one text in particular that provides an ideal example: Genesis 4.

## 2. Reading a Text from a Local Context

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the LORD.” Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” And the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech. Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who make all kinds of bronze and iron tools. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:  
I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for striking me.  
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.”

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him. To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD.<sup>1</sup>

### A Reading of Genesis 4

By the end of Genesis 3 earth creature Adam and companion Eve have joined the real world. It is the world as we know it, a mixture of blessing and curse. Cursed in the experience of disruption to God’s original dream and continuing risk thereto: relationships break, crops fail – as we soon find out - and violence terrorises. Blessed in its potential for

good inter-connected earth-based living because we are assured that the God who dreams life into being continues to care.

So we are not to wallow in the error of Eden. It is hard labour outside Eden and even the land finds it costly to sustain life. But the first verse of Genesis 4 alerts us that the original blessing of the life-giver. "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28) still holds. Conception and birth make their first appearance: two new lives, Cain and Abel.

In adulthood Cain and Abel represent two ancient - and modern - ways to live off the land: Abel, the keeper of sheep, and Cain, the tiller of the soil; stock and crop; animals and plants. In the course of time these two people naturally take a look at the results of their labours to assess their achievements. It seems it has not been an easy year (which year is?). We are not told the lambing percentage but it was probably not a good one; we sense that the yields of grain and seed are poor in quantity or quality or both, a hassle to harvest and hard grind to clean ready for use as food or as next season's seed. But in the nature of stock farming you can always select out your best from the flock and be proud of it even in a poor season, because you will be sure to have some prime lambs. It is the overall picture rather than the specifics that is worse than in the (perhaps mythical) good year. However, with plant crops, it shows up in the whole crop that then has to be assessed for use at a lesser grade.

"It's not fair," says Cain the agriculturalist. "Abel's better off than I am." (Doubtless if there were a dairy farmer within range, that one might have been keeping very quiet about even better fortunes!) Now in a good year there would be no issue. When everyone is prospering, all can feel positive and confident of their worth as a farmer. But in poorer years, envy, self-pity and self-doubt are inclined to enter the scene – "sin is lurking at the door" (v.7)

"But you must master it" says the voice of wisdom (v.7). God is trying to get Cain to face the reality of life outside Eden. He needs to focus on finding good life where it can be found, turn his efforts to recognising the blessings that do exist instead of getting hung up on the problems. But Cain cannot get the point. He reacts in what proves to be the way of least resistance, then and now: lashing out. It seems it is easiest to set himself apart from the world around him but, by doing that, he cannot help sensing everything he has separated himself from as antagonistic towards him. All he can do therefore is take a swing at the world that is not pleasing him.

When God moves in to raise questions about the violent act that ensues, Cain dismisses God's first question with a bit of a joke: does my brother, a keeper of sheep, need a keeper? In fact, this sums up his error of denying any connection between himself and his brother; he is proving himself to be no brother to Abel. But there can be no escaping the consequences of such a disconnected, uncaring act. With Abel's blood is poured into it, the earth itself - the very topsoil that gives life if care and labour are given to it - cries out against the murder. Cain's act of violence is so contrary to God's original vision of life as an interconnected giving and receiving from earth and from human companions that Cain cannot now return to normal life. Violence has knocked him out of the web so he becomes a placeless person, a constant wanderer, with no roots and no base.

And yet God's care continues. The mark of Cain is an ancient expression of God's commitment even to the vagrant, indeed to all outsiders of any society's norms and systems. There is therefore no need to fear what is perhaps the ultimate fear, namely the fear of being totally alone, disconnected and unwanted. Perhaps that was Cain's problem: perhaps he feared rejection most of all. He thought he had been rejected

because his farming efforts were not as good as Abel's, and he therefore disposed of his competition. If only he had known what he found out when it was too late to make a difference, after violence had taken over. If only he had known that he was not in competition for God's favour. God would always be there for him because there really is no competition for God's blessing.

- Is this a fanciful reading of the text of *Genesis 4*?

Perhaps the word 'creative' might be permitted, or 'interesting'. But it has to be granted that it is relevant. It relates to lived experience that can be vouched for: it arose directly out of interaction between text and a specific context. The context was March 2002 in Mid-Canterbury, New Zealand (i.e. harvest time) in the worship of a congregation with actual crop farmers sitting beside actual stock farmers, some who are both, with farmers enjoying the boom in dairying also present. What is more, after a number of years of poor returns, sheep and beef farmers were at last feeling good about themselves and their prospects. Crop farmers, however, were battling through another difficult season, with anxiety over getting crops in during the short spells of fine weather, dressing out the rubbish caused by disease and weeds, and realising financial returns that would justify their efforts.

But is this a valid interpretation of an ancient text that has echoed with its warnings and wisdom, its connotations and conflicts in the likely thousands of years since it was first shared as a tale? Eccentric, interesting, but ...

- Is it legitimate to tell the story this way?
- Is it true to the text?

### **How Little the Text Says**

This calls for us to return to the 'bare' text and notice how little it says and how much we bring to it from past interpretation and our own past experience of life. It seems this text has been used to tell many 'eccentric' stories. As a drama in its own right it tells of sex between two people, the birth of two sons, their action as adults of offering their respective life and work to God, a good response for one and not the other, God's advice for dealing with negative reactions, Cain's rejecting the advice and killing Abel, God's accusation and remedy, followed by the continuation of life in both constructive and destructive ways among Cain's descendants and a new start with a third son called Seth.

The text does not give reasons for the divine approval of Abel and disapproval of Cain for the sacrifices they brought. It says nothing about one being a better than the other, their sacrifices or their intentions being of different quality, nor that their occupations were the point of difference in God's favour.

### **How Much the Text is Heard Saying**

Yet the text in its vocabulary and its narrative structure can be heard to speak a great deal. The Earth Creature and the Mother of all Living put their new knowledge into action, and a child, or rather a "man" (*ish*), is born. The woman (not the man as in Genesis 2) names him *qayin*, one she has acquired or perhaps even created in cahoots with *YHWH*-God. Soil (*adamah*) and *YHWH* create *adam* in Genesis 2; Woman (*ishshah*) and *YHWH* create *ish* in Genesis 4. By the end of the chapter she is giving birth for a third time, but her speech is much more subdued with creative power all attributed to *YHWH*. Something seems to have happened in between. But back with the joyful announcement of the first-



born, we are then informed that she gives birth to a second, “Cain’s brother” named *hebel*. Nothing more needs to be said for one whose name means “a breath of air”, perhaps something, perhaps nothing, the source and sign of life but oh so transient. The legacy of the previous chapters is clearly shown in these blessings of continuing life but also in the curse of the soil. The *adamah* proves not just hard labour but a face-collapsing disappointment in what it produces. When things go wrong, even worse than they went wrong in the garden, and murder happens, the soil gains a voice to make known the truth and shuts itself off entirely as a source of livelihood for the one who was previously dependent upon it.

### **A Text That Travels**

That’s some of the things the immediate words can stir in the minds of readers. Beyond the immediate Genesis 4 has also held literary conversations with a wide range of other texts, in Hebrew Scripture, the New Testament and Inter-testamental literature. For example:

1. Finding livelihood from the soil will be the renewed task for Noah and his family after the Flood.
2. The major prophetic theme of right action rather than sacrifice perhaps betrays links with editors of the Genesis text located in exilic and post-exilic Israel.
3. Similar editorial connections show up in a Wisdom theme of good counsel in at least inchoate form within Genesis 4, and memories of Cain, the acquired one, and Abel, the whiff of air, could in turn bring a new slant to Qohelet’s life of acquiring knowledge only to reach ultimate absurdity (Ecclesiastes).
4. The Inter-testamental book, Jubilees, retells the story as a lesson in God’s judgment.
5. Hebrews sees faith as the core issue (11:4), and Abel’s death a sacrifice that speaks, although Jesus’ blood speaks better (12:24).
6. Matthew assumes righteousness in Abel (23:35).
7. Jude condemns Cain’s way as that of irrational animals, knowing by instinct and acting only for gain (Jude 10-11).

This is indeed, as Judith McKinlay puts it, “a text that has travelled”.<sup>2</sup> At multiple times and places the story of Cain and Abel has spoken and been spoken to. It travels and speaks whenever the drama and genealogy it contains interact with a context that takes an interest in it, whenever it presents itself as a response to the issues that predominate in a particular time and place, with potential answers to pressing questions.

- Let the text of *Genesis 4* settle for a moment right in the middle of your current context:
  - What issues do you and the text have in common?
  - What new thoughts come to mind?

### 3. Many Doors for Opening up God's Word: Part 1

It's time for a taste of the multiplicity of interpretations that Genesis 4 is open to. Throughout history, this story has been read in ways that are many and varied. It's not that multiplicity has been a problem. The biggest problems have come when a particular interpretation has presented itself as the only right one.

It is a strength of a text like Genesis 4 that it is not limited to one lesson or one meaning only. And it is an ideal text to demonstrate how variety naturally enters the scene. We can approach this text from directions: it all depends what aspects of life readers currently have on their minds. We come with differing, but not necessarily conflicting, interests and issues and it is as if we enter the text through a different door depending on where we are coming from.

#### a. The Door-way of Issues with the Sacrifice

- Why did God disregard Cain's sacrifice?
- What was the problem with it?

Perhaps there was something wrong with Cain or something right with Abel that needed showing up.

But it could be the case that, just as the text makes no issue of the sacrifice, so it is of no concern to the narrator. Perhaps it is a 'narrative means' to get to the real point of concern, namely, how to respond to experiences like failure, rejection or feeling disadvantaged.

Yet many interpreters seem to have ignored how little the text says about the whys and wherefores of the sacrifice and speculated on it at length. They may have noticed the narrative silence but felt it inappropriate to disregard the 'noise' in their own heads or to silence their own questions about God's justice.

It may be a plot mechanism, but it throws up its own issues. As a narrative means to a narrative end it seems awfully risky to use God's rejection of a sacrifice to make a point. Does the end always justify the means for a narrator? Hinting at injustice on the part of a one of the key characters – God – is very problematic.

#### Some theories about why Cain's contribution was rejected

- The phrase "in the course of time" (v.3) suggests that Cain made his sacrifice when he got round to it, with no urgency nor any sense of priority: Abel stands for virtue and Cain for vice (Philo of Alexandria).
- "Some of the fruit of the ground" (v.3) is a phrase that contrasts with Abel's "firstlings and fat portions" (v.4), inferring that Cain only brought leftovers (Genesis Rabba).
- It is faith that makes the difference for Abel (The Book of Hebrews).
- For the type of sacrifice involved (*minha*) the intentions of the one who offers it are paramount, so there must have been something wrong with Cain's intentions (Robert Daly).
- The blame rest squarely with Adam – the sin which Cain inherits - and the text is a lesson in God's judgment (John Calvin).

- It is their occupations that are the problem: shepherds have a caring, kingly role, as “watchmen of God’s creation”; agriculturalists get results by using the earth and exploiting it for their own gain (Philo again, and Josephus).
- God likes the smell of meat best! (Saul Levin. Levin observes that God’s nose is a very important feature in the Old Testament – note how Noah got a favourable response in Genesis 8:21 and that the phrase “slow to anger” is literally “long of nose” in Hebrew).

In all, questioning the sacrifice means questioning the human beings involved, the merit of their actions or the worth of their character. “Attempts to demonstrate the inferiority of Cain’s gift ... assume that divine acceptance will always be the product of human performance.”<sup>3</sup>

## b. An Ethical Door-way

Regardless of these debates about the sacrifice, Cain’s reaction – he is infuriated – gets the story to a crucial point, which for a number of interpreters is an ethical point.

1. Genesis 4 connects with previous texts, particularly Genesis 2-3 but also Genesis 1, to explore the question ‘what will life be like for these creatures God has called into being?’ “With the knowledge of good and evil, human beings have the capacity for either,”<sup>4</sup> so the stress is now on choice and decision.<sup>5</sup> God confronts Cain with his relationship with his brother Abel and the fact that Cain demonstrates, first in his response of anger, then in his act of murder, that he does not behave as a brother should. Indeed Cain “is never called the brother of Abel”, a point that is in stark contrast to Abel who is “invariably called the brother of Cain.”<sup>6</sup> God’s questioning invites Cain to face up to his responsibility for his violent act but it “also conveys a sense of community.”<sup>7</sup> God offers a lesson in human life as lived in watchfulness with and for others.
2. The first ethical lessons are, however, back at the moment of choice. Cain stands on the threshold given him by the knowledge of good and evil as he feels the anger rise up inside himself. He has a choice and God gives him advice to help him choose good and not evil. Sin is like an animal lying in wait, perhaps a wild animal, perhaps a domestic animal – a cat or a dog – “that lies in repose at the door of one’s dwelling,”<sup>8</sup> which has its attractions and its quirks but is domesticated from the wild and under continually re-asserted and re-negotiated control. You must find a way to deal with it, says God, deal with the enemy inside you, rather than project it onto the other.
 

There’s an element of subjectivity in Cain. It’s hard to know exactly what’s going on inside him. He’s made a spiritually expansive gesture, and then he’s rejected. He’s clearly just cast completely into himself. It’s a maelstrom. And then God says something very interesting: “The choice is yours.”... God is saying, “The blood is boiling in your veins. But if you get outside it, get over it, look at it, see it, you can master it.”<sup>9</sup> Having cast out Cain’s parents “for fear that they’re becoming too Godlike in having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge”, here “God seems to be saying to their son, ‘Be a little more Godlike!’”<sup>10</sup>
3. The consequences of Cain’s action are an important ethical feature of this story. A common approach is to interpret the consequences as punishment, meaning that the outcomes is a specific and targeted response by God to Cain’s behaviour. By passing judgment on right and wrong and exacting retribution from the wrongdoer this is to be a lesson for future reference. Boundaries of right and wrong are clearly drawn and God is installed as humankind’s keeper and judge.

4. There is no let off for Cain before this judge. Lies do not work. Cain may think he exists as an independent and separate individual (and that's why the rejection hits so hard – the failure is all on his shoulders and he gets no consolation from the success of his brother). But the connections hold beyond Cain and another voice, the soil, speaks its part to God the creator and keeper of the connections. Rhetoric doesn't work either for Cain. The question 'am I my brother's keeper?' is sharp and petulant: the word 'keeper' is a stronger term than might be required for God's purposes here, and it enables Cain to use the classic ploy of overstating the case in order to deny all responsibility. A caring watchfulness, yes, but not the dependency-based custodial role he is suggesting. Maybe the extremes of the word 'keeper' continue to act as an escape route in relation to this story as it is read in contemporary contexts. It can be argued that killing is unavoidable in the context of war and that wars happen because we cannot be 'keepers' for all people, especially not those who threaten our own safety. We rationalise harming others, economically and socially, as an unavoidable consequence of needing to 'keep' ourselves and our own but unable to look after everyone.
5. But rather than seeing the consequences for Cain as intentional punishment they can be seen as simply the logical outcome of Cain's destructive act. For example, "A man who cannot live in peace with his brother has no choice but to leave the land"<sup>11</sup> and "if he cannot 'keep' his brother, neither can he keep the land."<sup>12</sup> For Alan Boesak the consequences for Cain are a lesson for all oppressors, that they "shall have no place on God's earth", especially in the respect that it is a curse that "strikes at Cain's very way of life, bound up with the land..."<sup>13</sup> The outcome of Cain's deed is indicative of the way decisions for evil often come back on the person who makes them, undermining the foundation of their livelihood and value system.
6. Genesis 4 presents lessons in social ethics. This is in contrast to, and a significant development from, Genesis 1-3 where the lessons concerned the relationship of individuals to God and to other human individuals. As Walter Brueggemann puts it: "To live in God's world on God's terms is enough of a problem (Genesis 2-3)... But to live with God's other creatures, specifically human creatures (the brother), is more of a dilemma."<sup>14</sup>
7. Living together in community has risks even before human beings start making choices. Basic realities of life on earth, which make circumstances far from equal and fair for everyone can put human beings on the back foot from the start. The narrator is highlighting the fact that "Inequality enters where there should be equality,"<sup>15</sup> and 'throwing up' an example of inequality in order to point out its dangers, and then point towards the best options. Learn from this, the narrator is saying: recognise the destructive in life as it comes to you, and uncover the constructive even when life seems unfair. Learn what is death-dealing and what is life-giving, and choose well.
  - But is *God* soft on Cain in not imposing "proportional punishment" that could then be an effective deterrent for potential killers in the future?
  - Is the opposite of deterrence is suggested, namely, that with *God* you can get away with murder?<sup>16</sup>

## 4. Many Doors for Opening up God's Word: Part 2

### c. A Theological Door-way

The questions at the end of the previous section invite us to consider this next route into the text to find God's word for us.

The assumption that there is a link between divine acceptance and human achievement ties in with the fact that human beings are inclined to take an ethical, or generally functional, approach to matters of success and failure. But biblical narratives do not always share this overriding concern for human ways and means to do things right with God:

Attempts to demonstrate the inferiority of Cain's gift ... assume that divine acceptance will always be the product of human performance... While this is often the case in biblical narratives, it is not always so. The fundamental preference for the people of Israel, for example, is not based on human performance, and Genesis 4 seems to be concerned precisely with the tension between an ungrounded divine preference and the consequences for the rest of humanity who are not graced by God's favour.<sup>17</sup>

□ What is this story telling us about God?

1. This is the God we also meet in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. God's word to the people of Israel tells them that it is not so much who you are, but how you related to other people, that matters. It's not status or wealth or age, but right relationships that count, that is, not sacrifice but justice.<sup>18</sup> (This is a theological point with an ethical consequence.)
2. Perhaps this is a God who simply prefers the younger sibling, a consistent theme throughout the book of Genesis and beyond. Abel, Seth, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are all chosen by God, or given a clear sense of God's blessing, ahead of their older siblings.
3. Another approach is to see this God as one who hears the cry of pain and listens to the voices of struggle, the God who has a preferential option for the underdog. Abel is not even called his mother's son but only ever named as 'Cain's brother' and his name, *hevel*, means futility at worst, a breath of air at best. Yet this is the one preferred by God when the two brothers line up with their sacrifices:

Abel's name strongly suggests that in the eyes of other people he does not amount to much. Is it more likely that Cain is envious not because Abel is more successful, but because Yahweh looks at a blunderer like Abel while ignoring Cain?<sup>19</sup>

This theme continues as God hears the cry that no one else will hear, namely, the cry of blood in the ground in the seeming void of an open field. And God proves consistent in hearing Cain's cry of despair for his future<sup>20</sup> and gives Cain a mark that will give enough protection to enable his life to continue and indeed find a new path.

4. Perhaps we meet a pacifist God in this text, who places a mark of protection on Cain, in order to put a block on the cycle of vengeance. Thompson contrasts the Genesis narrative on Cain and Abel with that of Jubilees. The Genesis narrative is "unflinching", he says, in its answer to the theological question it raises: "Can one now abandon Cain the murderer and still hold to the divine command of freedom that the story set out with equal logic against an innocent Cain?" God cares about

Cain: “Yahweh is mankind’s keeper, he is our keeper, and he accepts his role as Cain’s protector. The story is pacifist.”<sup>21</sup>

5. But in the book of Jubilees the theological purpose is different. God in the Jubilees’ narrative of Cain and Abel is a God of judgment. The one who is judged is therefore branded for life and his descendants cursed for their moral failure.
6. God in Genesis 4 will not be boxed into any rational system, just like the God encountered in the Wisdom Literature (e.g. Job and Ecclesiastes).

How do we come to terms with the God who plays favourites...whose own preference turns brother against brother...who is silent in the moment of violence...who just doesn’t give answers to these deep questions?<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the problem lies with Cain’s “inability to resign himself to Yahweh’s inscrutable will.”<sup>23</sup> The very assumption that there is or should be a rational system relating actions to their consequences is what Ecclesiastes found to be as futile as ‘shepherding wind’. It is only when one gets to that point of recognition, when “the belief in a grand causal order collapses,”<sup>24</sup> that reality is faced. Reality is then given the respect it warrants and needs, if we are to live in life-affirming interaction with it.<sup>25</sup>

7. We also see a God who is the Creator, Sustainer and ‘Advocate’ for things and their connectedness. In Genesis 4 a process of alienation from the Earth begins to dominate human existence and put life at risk. With toil and sweat it was possible to get livelihood from the soil in ancient Palestine. But it needed constructive use of the knowledge of good and evil to determine what was truly beneficial. Antagonism with one’s brother, with its worst-case scenario of murder, is not beneficial. It involves human beings breaking the connectedness of God’s creation and separate themselves off from others, God and earth included. Cain then takes the process of alienation further:

Unable to make a living from the soil, Cain does something to *emancipate* himself from it: In a conscious choice Cain frees himself from the existence of a vagrant and a wanderer by building a city. He also frees himself from the burden of having to till the soil. City culture allows him to become independent of the drudgery of the life of a peasant.<sup>26</sup>

8. This new start and the development of skills and crafts among Cain’s descendants can be recognised as simply that: a new start. Genesis 4 shows us a God who always has a new way forward, for whom “the process of life is stronger than any of God’s other acts.”<sup>27</sup> At the start of Genesis 4 we see this in the new life born to Adam and Eve now they live outside the garden. At the end of Genesis 4, after the tragedy of losing two sons, it is there again with the birth of Seth. And there is new life of a kind for Cain and his descendants.
9. There is also something new in human relationships with God. However the link with God may have been understood before (whatever was involved in the brothers’ act of bringing sacrifice to God, for example) human relating to God now has a clear means for expression: *At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD.* (4.26)

## d. Sociology as a Door-way

What is reflected in social terms in the story of Cain and Abel?

The main focus is on Cain's new option for human existence – city life – and the attitudes are varied. City living means large numbers of people living in the same place without kinship bonds. Now violence is harder to contain without close social and familial sanctions, unless it is by the greater force of the ruling powers. Violence can surface also in the need for city dwellers to extract, by force if necessary, their basic needs for living from the countryside around. But urban life is also where human creativity begins to flourish with structured economic relationships enabling craftspeople and artisans to find a niche and technology to be developed.

1. This Genesis text presents us with the basic sociological issue of difference among people, particularly in their mode of life and livelihood. It seems also in the latter part, after the banishment of Cain, to have a specific concern with how to relate to creativity, that is, to craft and technology. Paula McNutt offers a fascinating perspective on the place of marginal types in human society, which is interesting from an historical point of view but also poses questions relevant to contemporary societies.

Cain and his descendants are forerunners in the diversification of human society, “introducing to humankind some of the primary elements of civilization.”<sup>28</sup> But this initiative and innovation has a mixed reception. By researching comparable stories from traditional African and Middle Eastern societies McNutt identifies the “social marginality” among Cain and his descendants with that experienced by smiths and artisans. The methods and creative abilities of these people were beyond the ken of nomads and settled agriculturalists and seemed like magic to them. Yet what they were able to do, and what they produced, were “economic and cultural necessities”<sup>29</sup> within a society that continued to function according to established patterns of generations of pastoralists and gardeners. The mark of Cain therefore reflects the sociological reality of the ‘stigma’ of people who were “basically ‘sacred’ in the true, *ambivalent sense of the word.*”<sup>30</sup>

- What are our attitudes to people who perform various roles within society?
  - What roles do we set apart, both in terms of looking up to them and looking down on them, trusting and distrusting, treating with awe and viewing with suspicion?
2. Others have noticed an anti-civilisation tilt within the text. Genesis shows up some level of tension, if not conflict, between the two ways of life, agricultural and pastoral,<sup>31</sup> the agricultural reflecting the more developed mode. For in the mind of the narrator it is likely that Abel, the shepherd, had the advantage.<sup>32</sup>
    - Would human beings be better off if they lived with the values and ways of more primitive societies?

The story shows us the pluses and minuses of civilisation in its early stages. There is a positive, and potentially constructive, division of labour developing but there is a negative aspect in terms of the rivalry that ensues and the conflict that rivalry produces.<sup>33</sup> We get the impression that there is an inbuilt tension in human

existence, and it needs some kind of social system or mechanism to alleviate it or to contain its more violent tendencies. Perhaps the narrator gives the mechanism to achieve this in the last verse of Genesis 4: the worship of the Lord.

- What are the effective systems or mechanisms against violence in contemporary society?

3. Family life is another matter under consideration in this text. What we encounter in the Cain and Abel narrative are sibling jealousies and favouritism. Whether the favouritism is actual, or simply experienced as such because the reasons are not understood, something happens that drives a wedge between the brothers. Parental attitudes towards the first child or the younger child can be instinctive and difficult to modify. Likewise assumptions about the significance of one's place as a child within the family can also be ingrained and emotionally decisive. Jealousy and the catch cry 'that's not fair!' are deeper in our experience and memories than we sometimes care to acknowledge.

Family tensions have similar issues to those of wider social interaction. They stem from the tension between 'same' and 'different', with each of us being composed of the same basic stuff and format, but each also being different from others.

- How is 'sameness' to be acknowledged without treating it as 'identical' with oneself and effectively taking it over?
- How is 'difference' recognised as different without then labelling it as 'alien'?



## 5. Many Doors for Opening up God's Word: Part 3

### e. A Political Door-way

When we start arguing the pros and cons of different forms of human society and interaction – rather than just describing them - and promoting a particular way as the best way, we move from sociology to politics.

In the ancient Middle East there was a general sense of optimism about human 'progress' as many Mesopotamian texts suggest. But some biblical texts give a very different impression, with the history of human life unveiling instead "the inexorable advance of sin."<sup>34</sup>

The political questions of the story of Genesis 4 relate to this contrasting perception: is there really progress at this point or is sin marching on?

And for us who read it now:

- Are we on or off track in the way we organise our political life?

### Political Systems in Ancient Israel

In early Israelite history a familial- and kinship-based Mode of Production structured social and economic relationships. With time a tributary- and monarchy-based Mode became dominant and by the reign of Solomon it became entrenched.<sup>35</sup> Genesis 4 was likely put in written form during the time of Solomon and it seems to be a product of its values. It is argued that in these early chapters of Genesis human origins are presented in a way that shores up the new monarchy-based establishment.

Traditional familial relationships drew multiple generations of siblings together as kin and put loyalty to this extended family ahead of all other loyalties. If these traditional extended kinship bonds care loosed, an alternative of primary loyalty to monarch and state opens up and, with it, greater state control of people's activities. The story of Cain and Abel is a lesson in the dangers inherent in sibling relationships and, by presenting these dangers as if they were inherent or unavoidable, promotes a policy of caution and even distrust among kin. Genesis 4 is therefore interpreted to be a royalist work composed during Solomon's reign:

...the narrative's dominant ideological concerns are those of the state, which needs to justify the creation of large privately owned estates together with the dispossession of peasant farmers from their inherited plots. The story legitimizes this process of dispossession by a new class of estate holders under the protection of the monarchy.<sup>36</sup>

### Sympathy for the Pastoralist

Abel may be the loser in the story, but the point is to generate sympathy for him as the victim. The story is to shift political sympathies away from the Cains of the time – those continuing to work the land in small, family-based agricultural units – towards the Abels – the owners of extensive pastoral territory, often resident in urban centres and functioning as absentee landlords. Cain's sacrifice parallels the way "the monarchy exacted tribute from village peasants"<sup>37</sup> – it is wanted but undervalued. It seems that what the agriculturalist brings is not what the dominant ideology values. The pastoralist's products are much better in the ruling viewpoint.

## Contemporary Politics and Devalued Sacrifice

Contemporary farmers in Aotearoa New Zealand know what it feels like for one's work to be publicly underrated by the prevailing politics. Promotion of the 'knowledge economy' as the way of the future, and of a need as a country to move away from primary production as a major source of national income, suggests the 'sacrifice' of farmers is being rejected because it is deemed outmoded and is holding the country back on the international scene. The politics of the story of Cain and Abel, in this reading, maintains that only Abel's work, only large property ownership and elite economic leadership, are the way of their future. Cain's life is outmoded, his production methods inefficient and the insistence of his kind to continue in their way of life is a block to national and economic development.

Contemporary farmers might well ask:

- How are people to live without primary products, i.e. food?

The Cains of Solomon's world may have asked: how can everyone be fed without cereal and vegetable crops? Can meat alone feed all, with none going short?

## Politics and Food

This is itself a political issue: how city dwellers are to get what they need to live, and how all are to be fed and not just the elite. When the descendants of Cain developed cities their food came from the people who continued to sweat and toil with the land. It was the peasants who provided the food and it has proved hard for cities throughout history to get what they need from struggling peasants with appropriating by exploitative and even violent means.<sup>38</sup>

This suggests a world where human life is ruled by a politics of the powerful. It's not surprising that in the biblical narrative this world turns out to be "ripe for the Flood."<sup>39</sup>

### f. A Door-way that asks: "Who's in Charge?"

"The main problem we encounter at the conclusion of the Eden story concerns the extent to which God will prefer freedom of will to obedience, and to what extent man [sic] in his turn will disrupt God's harmony."<sup>40</sup>

The first half of the quotation presents a major issue of human existence. It is the issue of power:

- Who is in control of the events of this narrative?
- Who is in charge of this world we live in?

## God's Ambivalence About Giving Life and Creativity

God seems to be in the business of giving in the early chapters of Genesis, but then something happens that sees God acting to reclaim the gift, banishing the human couple from the garden because of their disobedience, banishing Cain from the land because he killed his brother. God seems to have some ambivalence about who owns life and who has the ability to create new possibilities for life. God entrusts human beings with responsibility and gives them, through their choices, their own creativity. Yet God also seems keen to stay in charge and therefore reclaims authority when circumstances require it.

Contrast Eve's joy-filled and confident naming of her child Cain at the start of Genesis 4 with her response to the birth of Seth at the end. She seems to have learnt to be more modest in her claims and go cautiously with the God who gives and takes life. God seems to have taken back the right to control life-giving, just as in the mark of protection for Cain God takes back the right to control death-dealing.

Creativity is certainly at stake, a point brought out by the meaning of names, Cain's and Seth's in particular. The name Cain relates to the verbs 'acquire' and 'gain', and also to 'create'. It is argued that Cain's creativity proves to be his downfall, or rather his presumptions about his own ability as a "producer" and not just a "watchman of God's creation."<sup>41</sup> Seth comes on the scene as a contrast: his name suggests "an acknowledgement of the limitedness of human creativity vis-à-vis God."<sup>42</sup>

### **God gives freedom for the sake of responsibility**

Genesis 4 is clear in this respect, which can be observed by looking closely at the dialogue involving the voice of God. God questions Cain to highlight his responsibility for his actions and response to events in a way that respects his freedom to choose. Again God is picking up from Genesis 3: after the human couple eat the fruit of the forbidden tree knowledge of good and evil is a 'given' of human life. Humans live with choices for good or ill and the advice from God to Cain is to choose responsibly.

It seems that God is trying to get these new human beings to exercise their knowledge of good and evil. Carrying through from chapter 3 God wants them to use their knowledge and freedom constructively. Carrying through from Genesis 1 we could understand it as a matter of actually being the image of God. If 'likeness to God' means human beings ruling over the rest of creation then that has been debunked by the events and dialogue of Genesis 2-3. Perhaps likeness to God could have meant immortality, but that was ruled out when the barrier was installed at the end of Genesis 3 to prevent access to the Tree of Life. The meaning that now remains is that "the human can really be like God only by acting rightly, by ruling over sin (cf. 4.7)."<sup>43</sup>

The goal for Cain is therefore to be responsible in this way and overcome his frustration and the temptation to do wrong. He does have the power to deal with it and God seems to be testing human ability to its limits in order to release this power within him.

- How have you learned how to choose well?
- What have been the best lessons and who have been the best teachers?

### **Avoiding Responsibility**

There are other power plays also at work.

God gives responsibility, but Cain balks at the hard task of being responsible. He shifts the onus back to God, as the one in authority who is in charge of – and therefore responsible for – proceedings.<sup>44</sup> Faye Kellerman understands Cain's question 'am I my brother's keeper?' to reflect just this issue of responsibility: Cain is saying to God "You create this whole world. You created my parents. You created us. Who's the real keeper around here?"<sup>45</sup>

But God wants Cain to graduate beyond this: like a teacher God is trying to find the best way to educate this particular student. Brueggemann puts it in these terms: "By his seemingly capricious rejection of Cain, Yahweh has created a crisis. He poses the crisis to Cain and insists that Cain resolve it."<sup>46</sup>

## Facing Realities of Life on Earth

Human beings need to face the realities of life outside Eden. The arable earth produces only with hard toil and there will always be uneven results. Human beings cannot escape life with the soil – there is no other life and livelihood for *adamah*, the creature of the soil - but neither can they cruise along sure that every year will be a boom year. Human beings today cannot escape life with the Earth – the planet and its tapping of the sun’s energy is our sole resource base and it won’t keep on providing if we foul it up.

Uneven results for these early farmers suggest that equality is less the rule and more the exception in normal human experience. If we keep wanting to get a reason for every instance of inequality, we miss the point of dealing with it well or badly. Siblings and other family relationships are a universal reminder of how basic and ordinary inequality is, and that it is in some measure unavoidable. You are born who you are and where you are in the family, and that is that. ‘Face it, deal with it or else live in isolation’ seems to be the message. The best response to any crisis, like the crisis put in front of Cain, is to employ the knowledge humans have of good and evil. The advice for constructive human living is to utilise the power, exercise the creativity and claim the independence granted by the one who set the world in motion.

There is another piece of advice here: namely, that it is counter-productive to presume that, when things are unequal, there will always be opposition and antagonism between the unequals. There is much more to gain by being a responsible, creative and independent individual in constructive relation with others, linking up in power and purpose with others involve. The image is of synergy, with a policy of interacting rather than attacking.

- Does this suggest that violence is not an essential or unavoidable feature of human existence?

## 6. Choosing the Best Doors for Hearing God

### Choosing by Engaging

Multiple doors suggest options and options call for choices. The fact about human living is a fact about biblical texts: 'The choice is yours: choose well and your face will be lifted up; choose badly and you can imagine the consequences.'

- How are we to choose well when it comes to making our way into the Bible?
- Are there criteria for making good choices?

For this too is part of our freedom and responsibility. We are free to the doors we go through and the voices we listen to when we read the Bible and responsible to use a good process to do so. We allow the multiplicity to remain, not demanding the uniform kind of unity that claims there is one right interpretation. We select which aspect of the text in the Bible we give our attention to, which issue or issues we make our topic for conversation in our attempt to hear God speak to us.

### Good Process

The focus is therefore on 'good process'. Experience tells us that a number of things contribute to good process and they include transparency, agreed procedures, highlighting common ground, listening to marginal voices and leaving room for counter viewpoints. It is also important to treat decisions as giving permission for action while recognising that all decisions are open to reconsideration at a later time. Most critical of all is self-awareness among those involved in the process, particularly among those responsible for leading it.

### Knowing Our Assumptions

In making choices, including what aspects of a Bible text we are listening to, we need an acute consciousness of who we are and where we are going. From our experience of the past come the assumptions we carry with us - the preconceptions and prejudices that instinctively frame our thinking. They frame our thinking so instinctively we don't recognise them as the frame, but think they are the picture.

### Knowing Our Expectations

From the other direction, our attitude to the future provides the space in our psyche where expectations reside. This sets the agenda for what we expect of ourselves as well as what we expect of others and the world in general, and what they expect of us. Self-awareness of assumptions and expectations helps us recognise how we will subconsciously see things and what seem important to us.

### Knowing Our Issues

We also learn much by noticing the things that take our attention and engage our efforts. In particular it pays to take note of what keeps coming into our consciousness, disturbing us or breaking the flow of absorption in what we are doing. These are our issues, the problems, the dilemmas, the questions that butt into our lives and keep concerning us. We may be inclined to push them away because we cannot answer them, or because we know they are the very questions that need to be asked to get to the roots of our problems and that feels too hard a way to go.

As an example, primary questions that regularly come to mind for the writer of these studies are the following.

- Who is in charge?
- What place has goodness in this world?
- Who fits in this world?

**'Who is in charge?'** opens up questions about power and responsibility. Who is in control? Who can do something constructive?

**"What place has goodness in this world?"** asks for a appraisal of the world as it is: for example, is it possible to say honestly to a newborn child "the facts are friendly,"<sup>47</sup> or does evil rule with goodness needed to counter it, or is the world itself neutral? This question also calls for a decision on how to relate to the world - how and where to put goodness into practice.

**'Who fits in this world?'** lays bare issues of inclusion and exclusion, succeeding and failing. Who is being hurt? Who is being left out by our economics or politics, or by social custom?

These are the questions that I personally, cannot help carrying with me whenever I read the Bible. They are present, consciously or unconsciously, as my contribution to conversation every time I engage with the Bible. If I am to have a real conversation and hear God speak, I cannot hide myself and my interests behind a disguise of objective neutrality. Engagement with a Bible text requires me to be a subject speaking to the text: it implicates me together with my needs and preconceptions, or else it could not be engagement.

- What are your 'big questions'?
- What issues or dilemmas keep butting in on your life?
- What door-ways do your questions lead you towards?

### Uncovering An Assumption

- God chose Abel over Cain: why? Indeed, why choose? Why did God look favourably on Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's?
- Could God not have looked upon both?

It appears that only one can be acceptable and this conveys the assumption that God's regard is something to be given sparingly. Something here is presumed to be scarce and therefore must not be wasted, namely, God's favour, indeed God's love.

### Comparing Cain with Esau

Just as Esau asks Isaac "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" (Gen 27:36), so we might imagine Cain asking God: 'have you not kept any favour for me?' Must there be only one who is blessed, one who is favoured? This "pernicious principle of scarcity", as Schwartz calls it, means there is competition not just to address the physical needs of human life, but also to fill human emotional needs: "The logic of scarcity even governs love."<sup>48</sup>

## The Logic of Scarcity

If Genesis 4 and Genesis 25-27 did not treat scarcity as a fundamental fact of human life, there would seem to be no grounds for the rivalry contained in each story and no need for one to lose in order for the other to gain. What is being assumed is that a particular human being will count for something only at the expense of another or others. That is the logic of scarcity, a logic that makes rivalry, and its corollary violence, inevitable.

This is a genuine and powerful strand of thought in the Bible. Scarcity is part of the reality of life outside Eden. That is, life on planet Earth as we know it has no guarantee that everyone gets equality of circumstances and opportunities. Such is life: we have to live with it. We are wise to remember scarce times even in the midst of current plenty so that the balance doesn't get thrown out, like it can do when farmers indulge in over-expenditure in a boom year. Another example of the folly of not seeing beyond the plenty of the moment happened when the Israelites were in the wilderness post-Sinai. In the passage sometimes entitled "the graves of craving", they complained about lack of food but when an abundance arrived they ate so much that it poisoned them (Num 11:31-35).

The error lies not in claiming that scarcity is a fact of life, but in the assumption that scarcity rules. Other threads within biblical texts speak of plenty. Indeed it begins with the very first commandment in the Bible: "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). This alternate vision believes that there is more than enough to go around. It also believes that, like all good gifts, life and the supply of energy for living are not things to be held onto but enjoyed and passed on.

## Scarcity and Plenty

The truth about scarcity and plenty is not an argument to be settled. The reality of life is both. Both in continual tension. For example:

A parent loves each child uniquely and distinctly for their own individual self, yet loves every child they have borne or are responsible for.

In good economic times, we need to remember the hard times to keep our perspective but we also need to enjoy the good we are experiencing.

- What would be the implications of rewriting the story of Esau and Jacob, with a blessing for both?
- What would be gained in the story of Genesis 4 if Cain's offering had got the nod as well? What would be lost?

## Beyond Scarcity for God

It is conceivable that God sees no threat in sharing creativity with humans, with Eve who brings children to birth and with Cain and his descendants who develop culture and crafts in the context of city life.

It is also conceivable that God could look more than one way and have regard for the sacrifice of both brothers who come to offer their life and work.

As Schwartz argues, "this vision of plenty" is also in the Bible, "embedded" in it.<sup>49</sup> It is a minority report, drowned out or blended in by the dominant voice. Church tradition has tended to align itself to the stronger voices of the text, entrenching the dominant strand that assumes scarcity and expects the conflict of winners and losers. But the alternative is available in the Bible, and this is where my theme of multiple door-ways into texts crucial.

## Conversing with the Bible

We never come to the Bible as neutral observers, but always show up with questions, with our concerns that are, like the tip of the iceberg, indicators of the mass that lurks within our sea of living. We read with stuff on our minds - the stuff that 'sticks out' because it disturbs us, like a tooth or a toe that one is only aware of when it is sore, but then acutely aware.

And as we read the text with our concerns honestly before us, we listen for what it speaks back. We're in conversation together: what's on our minds gets drawn into the conversation, just like it does with a good friend. We hear voices that address us, that is, voices that respond to our questions, that are comforting, wise in their advice, or suggestive of change.

## Hearing Different Voices

Sometimes the clearest voices that we hear will be the dominant ones within the text, because it is those voices that give the needed energy and open up the future for us.

Sometimes the clearest voices will be the Bible's "counter-testimony" complaining about God and to God, connecting with our need for lament or protest.

Sometimes our troubles will call out the voices that have been hidden – the voices of people who know what it's like to be on the margins. We may hear the undercurrents carried in the text's silences or faint whispers, which give hope in being there.

When we listen openly, receptively and with awareness of our self and our needs, we get a chance to hear from the full range of testimony about God and ways that God can speak to us.

- Do we then finally have the truth, the real truth?
- Is this the clue to right interpretation of the Bible?
- That is, when silenced voices are heard and victims vindicated, will the truth reign and the violence end?

## Beyond Rivalry for Truth

The problem is that, as long as we hold on to the expectation that there is one right interpretation, we will continue with the idea of winners and losers and with the conflict of rivalry. The expectation of a single truth keeps people hunting for threads in the Bible to decree the right and legitimate ones. It might be argued, for example, that the dominant voice of the powerful was wrong and that the truth about God will come when we hear the voices of the victims. Raise up the victims: put down the oppressors. But then victims would be encouraged to become victimisers and the hurt and anger from their own suffering turned on others. Also the oppressors would become the oppressed and made the new victims. Whether covert or open, violence will remain the policy so long as it is assumed that only one way can be right and so long as truth itself is treated as a scarce commodity, to be possessed by only one story, one thread, or one school of thought.

- Imagine you are telling someone what you believe about an important matter and they say to you: "That may well, but the truth looks different from here". How does their view affect yours?



## 7. Rivalry: Seeds of Conflict Ancient and Modern

As soon as they get these two names [Cain and Abel], we see that one is going to be the victim and the other's going to be something else. And as soon as they choose their professions, or are assigned to them, we think of that line of Rodgers and Hammerstein's ... "The cowboys and the farmers can be friends" – which means, we know, they're not going to be.<sup>50</sup>

### Similar But Not The Same

The rivalry between two people or two groups who are similar but not exactly the same is so familiar it's a fact of life. It can be good fun, for example, on the sports-field. But it can be dangerous when the rivalry factor becomes the central focus. When differences between rivals predominate they mask the similarities and connections.

Rivalry puts the fundamental interconnection and interdependence of living things under stress.

Things that are quite similar can feel pressure to distinguish themselves from others like them, in order to stand out in some way and avoid being confused with them. With things that are markedly different, the need to stand out is not so great. It is closely related ones who are most likely to view each other as rivals for attention and distinction.

### Attitudes to Occupations Ancient and Modern

The drama of Genesis 4 brings to attention rivalry not just between siblings but between different occupations. It was apparently part of ancient Middle Eastern culture to look more favourably upon those who worked with stock as opposed to those who worked the soil. The possession of animals was a visible sign of economic status, and if you had no animals you were probably too poor to acquire any.

The Jesus we meet in the Gospels incorporated both agricultural and pastoral types in his stories but, although the title "the Good Shepherd" has a significant place in church doctrine and liturgy, somehow "the Good Sower" has not gained the same status.

Rivalry drove relationships among the colonisers in North America (as the song from musical show "Oklahoma" indicates), as it did in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rivalry continues in New Zealand farming, not as a major cause for concern, but as a subtle undercurrent along with an unofficial pecking order among the different sections (as experienced in Federated Farmers). It simply needs to be taken into consideration.

This situation is not confined to farming. Every occupation and profession could tell its own story of pecking orders and degrees of misunderstanding or very cautious respect. Healthy competition is one way of describing this rivalry: a spirit of competition is a significant motivating factor in many areas of human endeavour, and it can be a very enjoyable aspect of striving to do well and achieve higher goals.

'Friendly rivalry' - whether it is between neighbouring farmers watching each other's paddocks, lawyers in a court of law, mothers comparing notes on their babies' development, golfers out on the course, or a myriad of other possible examples - is not an oxymoron, but an honest and graphic description of a significant motivating factor.

### Giving Priority to Difference

It is not the competitive element itself that is the problem when rivalry becomes so chronic that destructiveness takes over. It is the priority given to 'difference'. When differences

matter more than anything else, points of commonality become secondary and even non-existent in considering how to behave towards the rival. Combine this intensifying of difference with the belief that there is only so much to go around – goods, land, money, women, (men,) etc. – and the result is a recipe for all kinds of rivalries including those currently bringing fear to New Zealand society and terror to international relations.

Under a perspective of plenty, strong and diverse ethnic identities would be celebrated as cultural flourishing. All it needs is for us to recognise that scarcity and plenty are dual facts of life and cultural differences need carry no threat to the territory or freedom of one's own kind. But under the perspective of scarcity an acute awareness of difference gives rise to tribalism and conflict.

### **Fear of the Other**

In an environment in which scarcity is the dominant fact, jobs, wealth and the right to be heard are all contested and fear becomes more prevalent, e.g. fear of a social underclass, fear of immigrants and, more generally, fear of the other. With immigration comes difference in religion. Rivalry in religion, whether combined with ethnic differences or standing on its own, is perhaps the most perplexing and fearful of all, and the one with regard to which Christians cannot escape some sense of shame:

Abraham came to be remembered as father not only of the ancient Hebrews, but also of Christians and Muslims. It could have been one community. Sadly enough, these [memories] ...succumbed to competition for the status of the true children of Abraham, to the scarcity principle. The myth of common humankind – the sons of Adam – splintered all too quickly into the terrors of Cain and Abel and their legacy of ethnic, national and religious hatred.<sup>51</sup>

### **Rivalry Within Christianity**

Such rivalry is not only inter-religious, but also intra-religious. Sects and denominations have a long history within Christianity but more recently, and perhaps more insidiously, groupings have formed within churches like my own that align themselves in terms of specific theological differences and their moral and political corollaries. The identity of the grouping is cast on the basis of statements of faith, expressed in specific beliefs or practices. Boundary lines are drawn, sometimes explicitly, often implicitly through a shared assumption that only people like us belong with us. It can be possible to visit a particular congregation and quite quickly identify, by verbal and body language, along with how the liturgy is organised and who does what, the type of theology the congregation adheres to. One may also pick up a clear message that, to belong here, you need to be people like us.

### **An Alternative to Rivalry: Telling One's Story**

Yet imagine visiting a similar group of people in their worship and not experiencing such a strong message of assertion and demarcation. It can happen if and when the manner and the language indicates that these people are simply telling their story of faith and expressing their hopes and fears before God. Rather than making universal claims to establish the right to the scarce territory called true faith, such worship would be offering their perspective with an implicit invitation to listen in. Such an approach presumes that there is room in the church, as in life generally, for a diversity of viewpoints. And with room there is a greater willingness to listen in to what is different, and perhaps be changed by it. It is sad that in the current scene of Western Christianity rivalry is thriving, but it is

hardly surprising when a sense of scarcity predominates in the face of a sense of inevitable decline, with resources of people and finances shrinking year by year.

- If scarcity and plenty are both facts of life, what 'plenty' is going unnoticed when it is presumed scarcity rules church life?

### **Rivalry and the Difficulty Cooperating**

When rivalry rules, exhortations to cooperation achieve very little. Exhortations do not address the fear that drives the rivalry. Perhaps one can provoke guilt or shame at the realisation that we are being rivals when we should not be, but guilt and shame are unlikely to be leading operatives in achieving change in the situation. We may be ashamed of what we are doing but, under the conditions of rivalry (and the rules of scarcity), we believe we have no option if we are to survive. What is more, cooperation and competition are treated as mutually exclusive options: either we compete or we cooperate. If competition has arisen because we are similar but different, and we are rather passionate about what we are doing and keen to excel ourselves, then letting go the competitive element means letting go an essential part of our motivation and drive. It could also feel like disregarding the difference between us and our rival, with the risk that we will cease to be who we are and be swallowed up and become like those we are competing with. If my integrity and purpose are this much at stake, cooperation will be a hazardous course to take. Cooperation seems to mean capitulation.

### **Revisoning the Interaction of 'Rivals'**

But a rethink is needed. We need to re-vision what happens when individuals and groups who are similar but different interact. Things look different when we keep scarcity and plenty both in the picture: both are well-founded facts of our existence. Not 'either/or' but 'both/and'.

***The vision of plenty encourages us not to hold on so tightly to what we have and what we know for sure, but to dare to try things out.***

***The reminder of scarcity keeps our feet on the ground.***

It is as if scarcity and plenty are themselves in continuous interaction, like two outer reaches of a pendulum swing. Held together and seen in mutual interaction, the fact of scarcity and the fact of plenty generate a constructive and creative understanding of life and therefore options for constructive and creative action.

### **Redrawing Identity**

The identity of one person or group need not be threatened by the existence of another person or group. Rivalry need not arise between different ones, when there is enough room for both. Cooperation need not lead to capitulation, nor is competition the only way to stand one's ground. 'Alongside' is an option for seeing oneself in relation to the other, combining the energies of the two rather than pitting them one against the other.

But in practice the questions continue to hold:

- Can friendship thrive between people who have enough in common that they can feel 'too close for comfort' for keeping identity intact?

- Is it possible for real friendships to form between people different enough to give rise to comparisons that may suggest an order of merit?
- How will the lines between identity and difference be drawn? Will some claim power to control the lines at the expense of others? Or is it possible for human beings to change?

### **From Power Battle to Energy Interaction**

Perhaps human beings could change the grammar they use to think about other people and turn the power battle into an energy interaction that can choose life, not death?

Human experience continues to supply strong evidence that scarcity and plenty are both facts of life on planet Earth. The relationship between these two facts is pivotal to determining how human beings relate to one another and to the planet itself. It is foundational to the attitudes of human beings to the very task of living their lives.

- Will scarcity rule, with the fear of missing out leading to rivalry and inevitable conflict?
- Or will people be able to keep the balance of the pendulum and recognise there is plenty life to be shared around?

Surely life is like that – a gift that keeps on being given again and again, and passed on into the future.

## 8. What To Do With People Who Do Bad Things?

### ‘Cain is a bad person, so he should be punished’

The view that he was bad from birth<sup>52</sup> has little following within modern scholarship, but popular perception of the story treats him as a chronic case of badness and beyond redemption once the murder is committed.

This response is itself one way to deal with bad people – categorise them. Separate them out from the others, as if goats from the sheep who have not crossed the line into badness. If they are very bad, confine them in a goat-hold or, if only partially bad, simply label them with the stigma of goat identity.

Reactions to the fate of Cain among today’s readers, and in church tradition through the centuries, sound strident notes that are in harsh harmony with some contemporary voices. These are the voices that are arising in Western societies facing increasing social violence.

We are told with regard to Cain: *he is a criminal; he should by rights have died for what he did; his banishment is a lesson for us all.*

Regarding those who commit violent acts today, we hear it said: *they should be punished; lock them up and throw away the key; if there is no justice there is no closure for victims.*

Vengeance says, not in this case the Lord, but the culture. Or rather the culture is presuming that vengeance is what the Lord says.

### The Instinctive Cry: ‘It’s Not Fair’

Maybe this call to deal to bad people can be traced to early instincts. Children speak the phrase ‘that’s not fair!’ from a very young age so perhaps this is a primitive force. The importance of getting as much as the person next to us (often a sibling) may be something deep within us, even prior to any influence or example. The question whether the cause is innate or environmental – nature or nurture – is probably academic because of how early it is ensconced in life. I, as a little child, demand consistency to ensure that I get what I need and from that it is a short step to demanding what I need because it is what I deserve. It is then another short step to carry this across to what happens when things go wrong: if I get into trouble for something I do, then others should get into trouble too when they do the same sort of thing. The sense that everyone should get their ‘just desserts’ becomes linked to punishment. So also does justice.

- What can satisfy this demand for a justice that closes the case?
- What can establish a fairness that ties up the loose ends and puts an end to complaint?

### Make Them Pay

Some sort of payment seems to suggest itself as a way to put the situation in order. It seems to need pay-back or retribution to put the wrong-doer back on the positive side of the tribute ledger. This may relate to the tendency in human experience to simplify very complex realities – e.g. actions, interactions, desires, intentions, effects and consequences – in an attempt to make them manageable. That is, the complexity of decisions and circumstances, of personalities and potentialities, are simplified into the notion that good people do good things and bad people do bad things. Good people gain credits from the

good things they do and can be seen as rewarded by the society that benefits from their good deeds (through conferring prosperity or status) or they are somehow rewarded later, with the help of an after-life of reckoning. Bad people do things to their discredit because their actions do damage, and any damage done must be paid for by the bad people in order to level the accounts.

- But why is this call made to extract payment in order to equalise the situation? How come we think it will work?

### **The Security of a System**

It seems to me to be part of a wider call for law and order. It is part of wanting to ensure the kind of security that goes with set systems and the guarantees of clear-cut rules. We have a hankering for certainty, and a deep-seated desire to know what will come next and be sure where we stand with it.

### **Constructive Wisdom in Contrast**

But this is not the most constructive way to react. The lesson for Cain to learn is that there is no certainty about what will happen and why it will happen. There is nothing to gain by doggedly pursuing the need to know: one simply has to learn to live with what happens as it happens. In the face of this mysterious unfairness of the world and how we interact with it as individuals and communities, we are wise to take it on the chin, so to speak. We are wise to join Qohelet, the writer of Ecclesiastes, and embrace the goodness that life has to offer:

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever. (Ecclesiastes 3:9-14a)

### **Coping With Limits to Understanding**

Despite appreciation of this as wisdom for constructive living, the impulse to vengeance seems to hold considerable ground. It is hard to let go the focus on sorting out the past and the urge to comprehend the basic incomprehensibility of existence remains strong. Now the urge to ask more questions and discover new knowledge and skills is constructive and enhances the life-options of the people involved. But there is a limit. Qohelet has probed deeply into the logic of the world, in the philosopher's endeavour to uncover a rational system driving all things and actions. He has found that there is no all encompassing rational system to be found: the world is only as logical as it is found to be, as a philosophy teacher at Otago University used to tell us.<sup>53</sup>

This is the way it is, yet Qohelet does not give into this fundamental irrationality. Even is unfairness proves to be something fundamental and mysterious that does not mean we should be resigned to suffering nor try to live in detachment from the suffering:

We want to know what Qohelet *really* believes. But Qohelet goes no further. He is at a dead end. *He* is frustrated and his readers should be too. Life *is* frustrating, and Qohelet refuses to make it any easier for us. His only response – not solution – is to urge us to embrace the good things that come to hand. We must tend our garden, though it will wither.<sup>54</sup>

Qohelet confronts the end of life and its comprehensibility, but then, as confronted and not denied, it is no longer just an end but an “edge”, a “threshold” on which this new move of embracing life can be made.<sup>55</sup>

### **The Depths of Anger**

But this “dead end” which can be experienced as ‘edge’ retains the fractures and disjunctures that threaten a final end. It is not emotionally neutral and not easily emotionally calm. It brings to mind another question relevant to Genesis 4:

- Why do people get so angry like they do?

One answer relates to the incomprehensibility of unfairness. If one assumes that life is supposed to be fair - if one presumes it can be made to fit the logic of rationality - the only way to stave off the “dead end” of irrationality is to fight against it. This fight feeds an anger that lashes out in the belief that for every action there needs to be an equalising reaction. Something must be done to make this bad situation right for me here and now. But equality cannot be the main matter at hand: indeed it is not among the realistic expectations of the world we live in and its pursuit for its own sake is damaging.

### **Limits to Equality**

The concept of equality functions well as an ideal against which to assess the world at a particular point in time. It is helpful to check whether there is something in the unequal situation that could have been, could in future be, different. The purpose then is to use human energies positively for the future, to help produce future situations that are more likely to be life-giving and put limits on the death-dealing. That is, justice can be done for the sake of a better future in terms of life, not death.

But when equality is claimed as one’s possession or right, it promotes reaction to past situations rather than pro-action for the future, the reaction of endeavouring to *equalise* the situation. The goal is to achieve closure to past events – somehow. But this can use up so much energy tracking to an end that produces no new life or happiness and often more death and anger, that there is little energy left for pursuing new openings.

### **Producing Order in Contrast to Restoring Order**

Seeking payment to reinstate order takes a past-centred perspective and produces a kind of lifeless equality. In contrast the advice to Cain points to the future, encouraging him to seek a way of responding that would equip him well for subsequent situations and would keep his resource base strong (that is, keep him on the land and keep him connected to others). What he needs is a store of experience in coping with whatever happens without falling apart. He needs confidence in his ability to feel the pain and unfairness of life yet get on with living by getting on with the people and world around him. He needs the means to pick up the pieces – to restore himself to functioning life again.

There is injustice in Cain’s situation of receiving a bad report for his crops and there is order that needs to be restored in the light of this injustice. There is also order that needs to be restored in the light of the injustice perpetrated by Cain in killing his brother.

But it is not the kind of order reinstated by payment to level the balance of accounts, but another kind. It is like the order that in physics and chemistry is called negentropy - order that holds energy ready for action.

## Restoring Energy for Living

It is the stored supply of potential energy that converts, when it is released, into motion or heat and thereby generates new actualities. Building up negentropy is a continual process of re-ordering, the most widely experienced example of which is the order-restoring that goes with housework. On planet Earth living organisms keep putting order into this energy system which on the inorganic side keeps increasing in disorder (entropy). Entropy, the reduction of stored forms of energy and the associated increase in dissipated, dispersed forms, is given some pause by the efforts of living organisms building up stored energy (negentropy) to sustain their existence.

Housework likewise re-orders by re-producing the kind of negentropy that is called tidiness and cleanness, in response to the recurring entropy of dirt and messiness. Doing housework adds to the potential energy of the situation - notably to the potential energy of the people whose house and home it is - by renewing the living space in which they find themselves reordered and restored. Note that this also happens whenever the soil is tilled and cared for, when, like Qohelet, we "tend our garden, though it will wither".

- ❑ So what would it mean to re-order the situation when violent crime is committed?
- ❑ Where is the restoration of energy for life for those made victims of violence, for the community and society polluted by the causes and effects of violence in its midst, and for the whole world's ecology scarred by destructive forces pulling apart interconnected threads within its web?
- ❑ And where is restoration to be found for the thread who is the perpetrator?

The issue remains open.

But at least if it is recognised to be a real question, and not already answered by systems of payment and expectations of vengeance, then we may be able to start negotiating some restorative resolutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 4:1-26, New Revised Standard Version, Oxford University Press, New York: 1991

<sup>2</sup> Personal conversation at the University of Otago.

<sup>3</sup> Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the politics of identity* Routledge, London and New York: 2000, 36.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> cf. Shamai Gelernder, , *The Good Creator: Literature and Theology in Genesis 1-11*, Scholars Press, Atlanta: 1997, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study" JSOT 52 (1991), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth M. Craig Jnr, "Questions Outside Eden (Genesis 4.1-16): Yahweh, Cain and their Rhetorical Interchange", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 86 (1999): 121.

<sup>8</sup> John van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 1992, 138.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Moyers *Genesis: A Living Conversation* Doubleday, New York: 1996, 78.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 80.

<sup>11</sup> Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict and Continuity in Genesis*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville: 1991,91.

<sup>12</sup> Brett, 38.

<sup>13</sup> David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1993, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, John Knox Press, Atlanta: 1982, 55.



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- <sup>15</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, Augsburg, Minneapolis: 1984, 297.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>17</sup> Brett, *op.cit.*, 36.
- <sup>18</sup> cf. van Seters, 138.
- <sup>19</sup> van Wolde, 31.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible in History*, Jonathan Cape, London: 1999, 332.
- <sup>22</sup> Moyers, 83.
- <sup>23</sup> Frank Anthony Spina, “The ‘Ground’ for Cain’s Rejection (Gen 4): *adamah* in the Context of Gen 1–11” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (1992): 321.
- <sup>24</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1999, 49.
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 49, 69-70.
- <sup>26</sup> Gunther Wittenberg,, “Alienation and ‘Emancipation’ from the Earth: The Earth Story in Genesis 4”, in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield: 2000, 111-112.
- <sup>27</sup> Gelande, 45.
- <sup>28</sup> Paula M. McNutt, “In the Shadow of Cain”, *Semeia* 87 (1999), 45.
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 48.
- <sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 50, italics in the original.
- <sup>31</sup> cf. Speiser in Gunn and Fewell, 21 and Spina, 319.
- <sup>32</sup> van Seters, 137.
- <sup>33</sup> cf. Westermann as considered by Gunn and Fewell, 23.
- <sup>34</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol 1 Genesis 1-15*, Word Books, Waco, Texas: 1987, 98.
- <sup>35</sup> Yee, Gale A., “Gender, Class, and the Social Scientific Study of Genesis 2-3”, *Semeia* 87 (1999): 177-192.
- <sup>36</sup> Gunn and Fewell, 26.
- <sup>37</sup> Mosala in Gunn and Fewell, 27.
- <sup>38</sup> Wittenberg, 112.
- <sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 113.
- <sup>40</sup> Gelande, 46.
- <sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 173.
- <sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 172.
- <sup>43</sup> Brett, 42.
- <sup>44</sup> Cf. Gelande, 64.
- <sup>45</sup> Moyers, 100.
- <sup>46</sup> Brueggemann, 57.
- <sup>47</sup> Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God*, Geoffrey Chapman, London: 1984, 34.
- <sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 81.
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 118.
- <sup>50</sup> John Barth, in Moyers, 98.
- <sup>51</sup> Schwartz, 159.
- <sup>52</sup> e.g. Philo, Calvin.
- <sup>53</sup> The Rev Henry Thornton in his classes on Immanuel Kant.
- <sup>54</sup> Fox, 70.
- <sup>55</sup> Timothy K. Beal, “C(ha)osmopolis”, in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Linafelt Tod and Timothy K. Beal, 303-304.\\