

LINGUISTIC AND THEMATIC LINKS BETWEEN GENESIS 4:1-16 AND GENESIS 2—3

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Biblical scholarship has frequently operated under the assumption that the Biblical text is most precisely and purposefully understood when broken into so-called original units, which then must be interpreted in terms of a hypothetical context in which they were created. Such an approach, in my opinion, is often less than helpful as an attempt to come to terms with the Biblical text. Gen 4:1-16 is a case in point. It has long been argued that these verses form a story originally independent of Genesis 2—3.¹ This has frequently led to an interpretation of 4:1-16 as a unit complete in itself, with its own motifs and perspectives. Likewise any accompanying discussion of Genesis 1—11 focuses on the attempts of an editor to link the various independent units. In this paper, however, I will argue that Gen 4:1-16, as received, is closely and carefully integrated, both linguistically and thematically, with Genesis 2—3. In fact any attempt to understand 4:1-16 apart from this context requires not only a slippery trek into the world of *Sitz im Leben* fantasy but also causes an unfortunate myopia that obscures many of the delicate and subtle syntactic structures present in the text.

Of necessity this paper is parasitic on my earlier work, "Genesis 2—3: The Theme of Intimacy and Alienation."² The structure, vocabulary and motifs of Genesis 2—3 are there treated in more detail than is possible here, and the reader may wish to refer to that work for a more complete discussion of ideas presented here in capsule form.

I. STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES

The first point to be examined is the structural similarities between Genesis 2—3 and Gen 4:1-16. The following items represent patterns employed in both of the sections:

1. The principal characters are introduced in terms of their functions. Man is to till the ground (2:5) and keep the garden (2:15); woman is to be a companion for man (2:18-25). Abel is presented as a keeper of sheep (4:2), Cain as a tiller of the ground (4:2).
2. Each account contains two primary figures, who are given life at about the same time. These figures are created in harmony with one another, but before long the harmony is lost. Soon after man's creation, woman is presented to man

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¹See, for example, S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis with Introduction and Notes* (London: Methuen, 1926) 63, 71-74; T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1975) 51-75; J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Cleveland: World, 1957) 308-309, 324; G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1963) 99-105.

²Paper read at the November 1978 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in New Orleans.

as his ideal helper (2:18-25). But before the account has concluded, the two are severely alienated from one another (3:7-14). Cain and Abel are brothers (note the stress on the word "brother" in 4:2, 8, 9, 10, 11), but Cain kills his brother in a fit of jealousy (4:8-9).

3. In both accounts a word of warning is issued before the sinful deed is committed. Man is told that he may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil lest he die (2:17). Cain is told that sin is couching at the door but that he must master it (4:7).

4. The principal characters are confronted by God after the deed, and he exposes their guilt by means of leading questions. God calls to man, "Where are you?" Man responds that he is hiding because he is naked. This response triggers the exchange that thoroughly exposes the alienation of man and woman from God and from one another (3:9-13). God asks Cain, "Where is your brother?" Cain's response reveals the animosity and callousness that led to the murder (4:9).

5. The deed exposed, God pronounces sentence on the offenders. Woman must endure pain in childbirth and be subject to her husband, while man must struggle with the ground (3:16-19). Cain will be a wanderer, and the ground will no longer yield to him its strength (4:11-12). Note especially the alienation of both Adam and Cain from the ground. The positive and gainful relationship each had had with the ground at the outset is lost.

6. The principal characters are driven away from their original context. Man and woman are driven from the garden (3:24), which both had enjoyed before the fall. Cain is driven away from the ground, which previously had been the source of his livelihood (4:14).

7. In both accounts the deed results in the separation of the principal characters from the presence of God. After they have eaten the fruit of the tree, man and woman hide themselves from the face of God (3:8). After murdering his brother, Cain bewails the fact that he must hide from the face of God (4:14; cf. also v 16).

8. At the close of each account, the characters dwell east of Eden. God places cherubim and a flaming sword at the east of the garden of Eden to prevent man and woman from gaining access to the tree of life (3:24). After Cain leaves the presence of God he dwells in the land of Nod, east of Eden (4:16).

These structural similarities suggest more than a casual relationship between the two stories. In fact it would appear that numerous key elements in the stories have been deliberately paralleled in order to lead the reader to relate major motifs in one account to major motifs in the other.

II. VERSE-BY-VERSE DISCUSSION

Now that a number of structural similarities between Genesis 2-3 and Gen 4:1-16 have been outlined, I will discuss—verse by verse—4:1-16, in which the thematic and linguistic links between the two units will be examined.

Verse 1. "Now Adam knew his wife Eve." The verb *yad'* ("know") is laden with meaning. In 3:5 woman had thought it desirable to gain "knowledge" of good and evil in order to be like God. Yet the very knowledge received as a result of the deed not only separates man and woman from God but also alienates them from one another (3:7-13). This alienation of man from woman is presented more pointedly in 3:7, where man and woman "know" that they are naked and make

themselves clothing, thereby withdrawing from their earlier intimacy with one another (cf. 2:25). When this same verb is used in 4:1 it reminds the reader of what has gone before. There will be new life, but because of man's desire to be like God, "knowing" good and evil (3:5), the earlier intimacy of the created order will no longer be present (3:15-19).

While man's "knowing" woman leads to the birth of Cain and Abel, the event is unavoidably bittersweet since the earlier desire for "knowledge" (3:5-6) has brought the consequences of death (2:17; 3:19). In 3:20 the woman, who triggered the process leading to the verdict of death, is ironically named Eve, symbolizing her role as the "mother of all living." Thus although in 4:1 Adam "knows" Eve, making it possible for her to bring forth new life, this new life must exist in the shadow of the sentence of death (3:19). This point is developed in detail in 4:8-16, where one of the sons brought forth by Eve murders the other.

The writer further reminds the reader of the alienation and divisiveness that have been introduced into the created order by using the roots *hrh* ("conceive") and *yld* ("bear"). In 3:16 the sentence pronounced upon woman includes these words: "I will greatly increase your pain in conception (*hrh*); in pain you will bear (*yld*) sons." The repetition of these words in 4:1 points back to both the sentence in 3:16 and the act that led to the sentence. This is another means used to tell the reader that all that takes place in 4:1-16 is a consequence of the fall. To add emphasis the writer again uses *yld* in v 2 to describe the birth of Abel.

The writer also recalls the fallenness of the created order by means of the word *'štw* ("his wife"). In 2:24, 2:25 and 3:8 woman had been described as "his wife," in those instances clearly implying the intimacy that existed between man and woman. In 3:12, however, where the alienation of man from woman reaches its climax, man coldly refers to her as *h'sh* ("the woman"), even as he tries to shift all the blame for the deed off himself and onto her. This curt and icy reference to "woman" as one whom man no longer experiences as his intimate companion will of necessity be in the mind of the reader when he again sees "his wife" (as in 4:1 and also earlier in 3:20, 21), and the term will now bear the implication of alienation and fallenness. After 3:12 woman cannot again be "his wife" in the same sense as before the fall. As we shall soon see, "his brother" will be used similarly in 4:1-16 to convey an initial intimacy that degenerates into alienation and murder.

Verse 2. The second son born bears a symbolic name: *hbl* ("Abel"). In the OT *hbl* frequently refers to "breath" (and life) that is fleeting and transitory (e.g., Ps 62:10; 144:4; Job 7:16). It is used in Qoheleth to describe the short and temporary status of human existence (Eccl 3:19; 11:8, 10).³ In Gen 2:7 God had breathed into man the "breath of life" (*nšmt Hyym*), a phrase that in that context emphasizes the bounty of new life. After the fall, however, Adam's second son receives a name indicating that man's life has been foreshortened and is only fleeting and temporary. Thus by using *hbl* the writer directs the reader's mind back to the "breath of life" given to man at creation, even while indicating that human life has become *hbl*, a fleeting "breath." This latter point is underscored by Cain's murder of Abel (*hbl*).

Cain is depicted as a tiller of the ground. This livelihood directly parallels that of Adam, who is placed in the garden to till it (2:15; cf. also 2:5) and who is consigned in 3:17-19 to a perpetual struggle with the ground, which will resist his

³For a more detailed discussion see KB 223.

efforts to make it bear food. Adam's deed caused his relationship with the ground to be adverse. So it will be with his son (see the discussion below of 4:10-14).

Verse 3. Cain brings to Yahweh an offering of the *pry* ("fruit") of the ground. The noun "fruit" provides yet another link with Genesis 2—3. In 3:1-6 the serpent beguiles woman, persuading her to eat the "fruit" of the tree in the midst of the garden. "Fruit" is used three times in those verses and symbolizes both the temptation placed on woman and the deed committed by her. The use of "fruit" in 4:3 immediately reminds the reader of the earlier role "fruit" played in the fall. This is appropriate, for in 4:1-16 "fruit" again plays a significant role in the offense committed. Yahweh has no regard for Cain's offering of the "fruit" of the ground, and Cain's anger over this leads directly to his murdering of Abel. The reader is thus led to parallel the offense of Cain with that of Adam and Eve.

Verses 4-7. The text offers no explicit reason why God looked with favor on the offering of Abel but did not look with favor on the offering of Cain. This is because the writer is not concerned with Yahweh's action but rather with Cain's response, as vv 5-6 clearly show. In v 5 we are told that "Cain was very angry" and that "his countenance fell." In v 6 Yahweh asks Cain, "Why are you angry?" and "Why has your countenance fallen?" The writer has repeated the key words *hrh* ("be angry") and *npl pnym* ("falling of face") in order to stress Cain's inability to deal with God's rebuff. It is this inability, revealed in Cain's unbridled rage, that will lead to the act of murder. Significantly, in Genesis 2—3 man and woman commit the offense against God despite the warning not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 4:7 serves to forewarn Cain: He must struggle against sinning—missing the mark—and master it. But, like his parents, he is unable to heed the warning.

Verse 8. It is to be presumed that there is a lacuna in MT, which does not tell what Cain said to Abel.⁴ Even so there are several key features in this verse. First, the phrase "his brother" is used twice, the purpose being to underline the closeness of Cain to Abel. It is not a foe, a stranger, or even a friend that Cain will kill, but his own flesh and blood. Verse 2 had earlier used "his brother" to stress the intimacy of Cain and Abel, thus setting the stage for the poignant use of the word in vv 8-11. Significantly, "his brother" is applied never to Cain but always to Abel. In fact after v 7 Abel's name is never used without the accompanying "his brother," and the last three times the victim is mentioned we have only "his brother" (vv 9b-11). The writer places so much stress on the fact that Abel is Cain's "brother" because he wants to emphasize the violent and heinous nature of the act. Indeed the repetition of "his brother" builds up like a crescendo, burning the deed into the mind of the reader.

Although Cain and Abel, as brothers, are most intimate, Cain shatters that intimacy by murdering his brother. This directly parallels the intimacy-alienation motif of Genesis 2—3. There the writer uses the last section of chap. 2 to show that woman is the ideal companion for man, and stresses the fact by the repeated use of "woman" and "his wife." In chap. 3 the intimacy dissolves until man, who had seen woman as "his wife," coldly refers to her as "the woman" (v 12), bluntly showing how complete their alienation has become. Thus just as the writer in Genesis 2—3 uses "his wife" and "the woman" to focus his motif of intimacy and alienation, so in 4:1-16 he uses "his brother" as a linguistic device to develop the intimacy-alienation motif here. This parallelism of theme and lin-

⁴See BHK (1962 ed.) 5.

guistic usage cannot be seen as an accidental coincidence between two accounts of separate origin. Rather it must be seen as the deliberate and skilled work of a single writer.

Another device employed by the writer is the phrase "he rose up." In v 5, when Cain realized that his offering had not been accepted by Yahweh, "his countenance fell" and he was very angry. In v 6 the words are repeated: "Why has your countenance fallen?" While these words are used to show Cain's displeasure and pouting, there is at this point no explicit discussion of his jealousy toward Abel, nor is there any direct suggestion that Abel will be slain. In v 7 Cain is told that if he does well he will "lift up" (his face)⁵—that is, "be pleased." This stands in stark contrast, however, to what Cain actually does. He "rises up"⁶ against Abel and kills him. This use of "rise up" is most appropriate, since the "rising up" of Cain to kill his brother is a direct consequence of the "falling" of his countenance when Abel's offering was accepted but his was not. It thus helps to develop the motif of alienation, as does also the specific wording: "Cain rose up *against* his brother Abel."

Verse 9. As was the case in 3:9-13, God prods the guilty one(s) by means of leading questions. And, as in 3:9-13, there is never a direct admission of guilt. In 3:12-13 man tries to pass the blame to woman (and also to God, who gave him the woman), and woman immediately passes the blame to the serpent. While Cain cannot pass the blame, he tries to deny that he has any responsibility toward his brother: "Am I my brother's keeper?" His attempted denial is, however, doomed to failure. Twice in this verse the writer points out that Abel is Cain's "brother," the very appearance of "brother" shouting out that Cain is of necessity responsible. The fact that Cain can dispassionately deny what he has done ("I do not know") and show a total lack of care and concern for his brother closely parallels man's total lack of regard for woman in 3:12, where man icily refers to his companion as "the woman" and places all the blame on her, thereby revealing a complete absence of the intimacy and companionship that earlier had characterized their relationship.

Just as in Genesis 3 the motif of man's alienation from woman reaches its climax in man's response (v 12), so in Genesis 4 the motif of Cain's alienation from Abel reaches its climax in Cain's heartless disclaimer: "Am I my brother's keeper?" The writer has deliberately and carefully used thematic and structural devices to parallel the climaxes of these two accounts.

Another important link with Genesis 2-3 is provided by the root *yd'* ("know"). After Yahweh asks Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain responds, "I do not know." In 3:5 "knowing" good and evil is described to woman as a desirable thing. The result of her striving for that "knowledge," however, is that man and woman know that they are naked, and are driven apart (3:7, 11-12). Thus when Cain responds "I do not know," his words remind the reader of the previous pattern of alienation, thereby showing that the alienation of Cain from

⁵See KB, 635, where it is suggested that *pnh* be understood here because of the parallelism with *nplw pnyw* ("his face fell") in vv 5-6. The suggestion of *BHK* (see previous note) that we read *tš'* ("you will lift up") instead of the infinitive *š't* is sound, since a simple scribal error could account for the transition from the former to the latter.

⁶This use of *qwm* ("rise up") is especially important since it is one of only two verbs used to describe the act of murder.

his brother is a continuation and consequence of what has gone before.

Verse 10. In 3:9 God has asked man the simple but revealing question, "Where are you?" In his answer (v 10) man does not admit what has happened, even though his statement about hiding because he is naked clearly reveals the extent of his guilt. God's second series of questions (v 11) pointedly charges man with the offense. Once this is done, man no longer attempts to hide his sin (v 12). The writer has used this same pattern in 4:9-13. God's first question to Cain simply asks where Abel is. Yet just as in 3:9 this simple question gets to the heart of the matter. Like Adam, Cain cannot tell what has happened, for to do so would be to uncover his guilt. Nevertheless his tart rejoinder—"Am I my brother's keeper?"—points clearly to his crime (cf. 3:10). Yahweh then charges Cain directly with the offense, and Cain no longer attempts to hide the murder (v 13). This parallelism in structure between the two accounts not only points to the working of the same literary mind but also shows a deliberate attempt to parallel the post-offense exchange between Yahweh and Adam with that between Yahweh and Cain.

Verses 10-12. The parallelism between Adam and Cain continues with the writer's theme of Cain's alienation from the ground. Adam's initial relationship with the ground was most intimate: He was created "from the dust of the ground" (2:7), and his function was to "till" it (2:5, 15; cf. also 3:23). Cain also begins with an intimate relationship with the ground: He is a "tiller of the ground" (4:2) and brings to Yahweh an offering from the "fruit of the ground" (4:3). Due to Adam's offense the ground will be cursed, bearing weeds along with produce and forcing him to toil in order to eat (3:17-19). Cain's punishment is even more harsh: When he tills the ground it will no longer yield its produce to him (4:12), and he will be driven from the face of the ground (4:14).⁷

The writer has stressed Cain's alienation from the ground in several ways. The voice of Abel's blood cries to Yahweh from the ground (4:10). In 3:17-19 the writer has shown that man's fate is to struggle with the ground, even though he must eventually return to the ground from which he was taken. In 4:10, however, the writer emphasizes that Abel has been returned to the ground prematurely, violently and unjustly. Abel's blood, which bears his ravaged life, cries out from the ground in protest against the murder. As a result Cain, who heretofore had made his living from the ground, now has become an enemy of it (vv 11-14). Once the ground has opened its mouth to receive Abel's blood (v 11) it can no longer return its strength to the murderer (v 12). The writer stresses this by twice associating Cain's deed with the ground: "The voice of the blood of your brother is crying unto me from ground" (v 10), and "The ground which has opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother from your hand . . ." (v 11). Finally the writer has used "when you till the ground, it shall not give its strength to you" (v 12) to point to Cain's radically changed status. He had been a tiller of the ground (4:2); now, however, tilling the soil will yield him nothing.

The scope of alienation has spread in vv 10-12. Cain's alienation from Abel, which results in the murder of Abel, has caused Cain's total alienation from the ground. Just as in Genesis 2—3, the effect of alienation is not limited but spreads rapidly and unavoidably.

⁷E. A. Speiser argues that *'rwr* ("cursed") in v 11 should instead be translated "banned," with the entire phrase then bearing the meaning, "You are banned from the soil"; *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 24, 31.

Verses 13-14. The disruptive power of alienation is stressed emphatically in vv 13-14. In v 13 Cain realizes that, due to the murder of his brother, his life will be radically different, with most of his former world now torn from him. That lost world is described in v 14, beginning with a reiteration of Cain's alienation from the ground: "Behold, you have driven me this day from the face of the ground." The verb *grš* ("be driven") appeared earlier in 3:24, where the man is "driven" by God from the garden. The writer thus parallels Adam, who was "driven" from his earlier abode due to his offense, with Cain, whose crime against Abel has caused him to be "driven" from the ground. The writer also emphasizes Cain's alienation from Yahweh: "And from thy face I must hide." The twofold use of "face" in the first half of v 14 is noteworthy. In vv 5-6 "face" is used twice to indicate Cain's displeasure at having his sacrifice rejected: His "face" falls. Verse 14 therefore reminds the reader that Cain's prior anger at Yahweh is the cause of his deed and subsequent alienation from the ground and from Yahweh. Furthermore the use of "face" points the reader back to 3:8 where man and woman, having committed the forbidden act, realize their alienation from God and hide themselves "from the face of Yahweh." The writer thus parallels the offense of man and woman, which causes them to hide from God's presence, with the offense of Cain, which causes him to hide from God's presence.

That Cain has been alienated from his former world is also indicated by his being a "fugitive" and a "wanderer," these same words having appeared earlier in v 12. This double usage in vv 12, 14 portrays Cain as one perpetually on the move, never able to sink his roots anywhere. Here we have not so much a description of Cain's journeys during the rest of his life, but rather a metaphor for the perpetual alienation that has become his lot in life due to his offense. The metaphor is developed further in v 16, where the place of Cain's dwelling is said to be the land of "wandering" ("Nod").

The final words in v 14—"and whoever finds me will kill me"—pointedly emphasize that Cain's punishment is directly due to his offense. The same verb (*hrg*, "kill") is used in v 8 to describe Cain's murder of his brother. Cain senses only too well that the punishment fits the crime. Significantly, this was not part of the sentence Yahweh had earlier pronounced on Cain (vv 11-12) but is introduced by Cain as part of the punishment he anticipates. Here Cain's alienation is driven home most directly: He feels that everyone will want to kill him because of what he has done.

Verse 15. In Genesis 2—3 nakedness serves as a symbol of the intimacy between man and woman. When that intimacy is shattered, the use of clothing to cover up—to hide from one another—symbolizes the alienation of man and woman from one another. Therefore when Yahweh makes garments of skins for the two, the writer is stressing both the permanence of the divisiveness which man and woman have brought upon themselves and also Yahweh's realization that alienation is unavoidably a part of man's existence.

Similarly, in 4:15 the writer pictures Yahweh again having to come to terms with man's fallenness. Just as Yahweh tolerates Adam and Eve, allowing them to continue living rather than destroying them immediately as a punishment for their offense, so Yahweh tolerates Cain. Not that Cain goes unpunished: His punishment is severe. But Yahweh confronts yet another way in which his creatures have fallen and, rather than destroying Cain, allows even the murderer to live. Yahweh's placing the mark on Cain symbolizes his realization that the murder of

Abel will not be unique but will be only the first instance of a deed all too common to fallen man. Just as Yahweh provides clothes for Adam and Eve, thereby helping them cover up and thus cope with the alienation they have caused, so he provides a mark for Cain to help him survive the violence he himself has unleashed.

Verse 16. "And Cain went out from before the face of Yahweh." This is not meant to indicate that Cain geographically left the presence of Yahweh, as if he could find an area outside Yahweh's realm of power. Rather it indicates that Cain, because of his deed, can no longer be on intimate terms with Yahweh. The writer deliberately concludes this account by stressing the alienation of Cain from Yahweh in order to form a parallel to the end of Genesis 3, where the alienation of man and woman from God is stressed (v 22) even as they are driven from the garden and the tree of life. The final words, "east of Eden," form a direct linguistic link with 3:24, the last verse of the Adam and Eve story. Both parents and son must dwell away from Eden, the ideal paradise God had intended for man before the onslaught of alienation.

III. SUMMARY

The story of Cain and Abel in Gen 4:1-16 is structurally, linguistically and thematically interwoven with the narrative of Genesis 2—3. The structural parallels include the presence in both accounts of (1) a description of the functions performed by the principal characters, (2) an interplay between two human figures whose originally harmonious relationship is disrupted, (3) a word of warning from God before the offense is committed, (4) an exchange in which God confronts the guilty parties with their deed, (5) the pronouncing of a sentence on the offenders, (6) the driving of the offenders from the world they knew before their deed, (7) the removal of the guilty ones from the presence of God, and (8) the dwelling of the offenders east of Eden.

The linguistic parallels include the following: (1) the use of "know" in 4:1 to point the reader back to knowledge as both a desire (3:5-6) and a consequence (3:7) associated with the fall; (2) the use in 4:1 of "conceive" and "bear," which point back to the sentence pronounced on woman in 3:16; (3) the use of the name Abel, "fleeting breath" (4:2), as a contrast to "breath of life" in 2:7; (4) the use of "fruit" in 4:3 as a means of reminding the reader of the temptation and offense of man and woman in regard to the fruit of the tree (3:2-6); (5) the use of "his brother" to express both Cain's intimacy with (4:2) and his alienation from (4:8-11) Abel, which parallels the use of "his wife" and "the woman" in Genesis 2—3 to express man's intimacy with and subsequent alienation from woman; (6) the use of "driven" in 4:14, where Cain realizes that he will be driven from the ground, as a parallel to the use of "driven" in 3:24, where man is driven from the garden; and (7) the use of "face" in 4:14, where Cain realizes that he must hide from the face of Yahweh, as a parallel to the hiding of man and woman from the face of God (3:8).

The principal thematic link is the motif of intimacy and alienation. Just as in Genesis 2—3 the intimacy of man with woman and the intimacy of both with God deteriorates into radical alienation, so in Gen 4:1-16 Cain's relationship with his brother deteriorates so completely that he kills Abel, with the result that Cain must henceforth hide from the face of God. The intimacy-alienation motif is also expressed through the relationship of the principal figures with the ground.

Adam is created from the ground, and his function is to till it. But as a result of his offense he becomes alienated from the ground to the extent that he must perpetually struggle with it to grow his food. Cain is at first a tiller of the ground but his murder of his brother causes him to be driven away from the ground, which will no longer yield its strength to him.

This partial list of the structural, linguistic and thematic links between Genesis 2—3 and 4:1-16 demonstrates that the two stories have been closely and carefully interwoven. It is not just the case that a clever editor has constructed links between the two originally independent stories. Rather, the two narratives have been written by one highly-skilled writer who has interwoven all major aspects of the two stories so that structurally, linguistically and thematically they form one unit. Any attempt to interpret the accounts without reference to their unity is likely to obscure and distort what the writer intended to say.