

## Genesis 4 as the Matrix of Mythos and the Matrix of Motifs for the Book of Genesis

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The goal of this paper is to provide evidence suggesting that in a synchronic reading of the book of Genesis, the Cain and Abel narrative introduces the complication that sets the *mythos* or the plot-structure of the Genesis narrative in motion. In this presentation I will first specify some of the assumptions that I rely upon but which go beyond the scope of this paper, then I will detail what I mean that the Cain and Abel narrative introduces the complication of the Genesis plot and finally I will support that view in three ways.

### *Assumptions*

First, as implied by my use of the word *mythos* in the title, I am applying an Aristotelian view of plot-structure whereby plot-structure creates out of several incidents or several smaller narratives a single whole (*Poetics* 1451a32, 1450b26-34). This single whole is made up of two parts, a complication and a dénouement or a movement from tension to resolution (1455b24).

My next assumption is that Genesis itself is part of a larger whole whether we take that larger whole as the Pentateuch or the Bible. In doing so, I am asking you to allow that in the beginning of Genesis there is another complication that arises that does not have its dénouement in the book of Genesis and the plot of Genesis is an incident that moves that tension forward toward resolution.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, in Genesis 1 and 2 we have the original state of creation where sinless humanity dwells in the sanctuary of creation—in the presence of creator God who provides for and protects them.<sup>2</sup> Humanity has the responsibility for maintaining the creation order but fails to do this and is exiled from God's presence. At the same time, when we read Gen 3 in the ANE context we can see that

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<sup>1</sup>There have been a number of studies that work on plot in Genesis but there really is only one that has come close to doing an analysis of the plot of the book as a whole, see Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, vol. 96, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). I will not go into much detail on his work, suffice it to say I am offering an alternative identification of the plot of Genesis. One could also compare Clines' *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, vol. 10, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>This argument is developed in my unpublished dissertation, Todd L. Patterson, "The Righteousness and Survival of the Seed: The Role of Plot in the Exegesis and Theology of Genesis" (Ph.D., Trinity International University, 2012). Several authors have developed the idea that Gen 1-3 applies the temple metaphor to creation, see Moshe Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple, and the Enthronement of the Lord: The Problem of the 'Sitz Im Leben' of Genesis 1:1-2:3," in *Melanges Bibliques et Orientaux En L'honneur de M Henri Cazelles* (Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercker, 1981), 501-12; Jon Douglas Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *Journal of Religion* 64, no. 3 (1984): 275-98; John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *"I Studied Inscriptions Before the Flood": Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 4 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 399-404.

Gen 3:15 suggests there is still to be a struggle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Conceivably, the text introduces the notion, or the hope, that the victory of the woman's seed over the serpent's seed will result in the restoration of order and a return to God's creation-sanctuary.<sup>3</sup> So the tension for the larger plot-structure is—can humanity return to God's creation sanctuary and will the seed of the woman help us do that?

These assumptions are the springboard for my claim that Gen 4 is the matrix of *mythos* for the Genesis narrative, that is, just as Gen 3 introduced the complication that drives the plot of Scripture, so Gen 4 introduces the complication that drives the Genesis narrative, which comes to dénouement in the Joseph narrative at the end of the book.

My assumptions are key because it is with this expectation to return to God's creation-sanctuary, and to do that somehow through the seed of the woman, that we enter the text of Gen 4. In other words, if we read according to the plot-structure set up in Gen 1–3 and if we are engaged in this tension of returning to God's creation-sanctuary then our focus in Gen 4 should be on the seed that will facilitate that return.

### *The Matrix of Mythos*

Now we'll look at how Gen 4 sets up the plot of Genesis. The Cain and Abel narrative interacts with the tension of the overall Scriptural plot by introducing the seed of the woman and in fact, it does this without delay. Adam knows Eve and she gives birth first to one son, then the other. Again, if we are reading according to the tension of the overall movement from tension to resolution then we are looking at this seed (singular or collective) as potentially the seed through which we will return to God's creation-sanctuary. As we continue reading, however, the text makes it clear that Cain is not the seed because he does not "master sin" (Gen 4:7) and Abel is not the seed because he dies. Then at the end Adam "again" knows his wife (just as he did at the beginning) and she gives birth to a son, to Seth, of whom Eve says, God has given me "another seed in place of Abel, for Cain killed him." The idea here is that the narrative seems to make this seed the focus by dealing with it at the beginning and end of the narrative.

The Cain and Abel narrative on the one hand increases the tension of the narrative because the first two candidates for seed fail. As we read for plot and as we look for this seed that will lead us back to God's creation rest, we now have added information about the seed because not just any seed will do. Cain fails because he does not master sin (4:7) and Abel fails because he does not survive. At the end of the narrative Eve gives birth to Seth so the seed continues but its continuation at the end of this narrative leads us to question—will the seed master sin and will it survive? And hence my suggestion that Gen 4 is the matrix of mythos for the book of Genesis.

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<sup>3</sup>Richard E. Averbeck, "Genesis 3, the Cosmic Battle, and the Fall of Satan," *ETS*, Evangelical Theological Society (2002).

### *Three Plausibility Tests*

Given this proposal for the plot of the book of Genesis we might ask is this a plausible proposal? Can we see all narratives in the book supporting this movement from complication to dénouement? Since the argument touches on the plot-structure of the entire book of Genesis a full argument is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will offer three lines of support. First by reading Gen 4 in relation to Gen 3 in order to show that Gen 4 does arguable pick up from the larger plot introduced in Gen 3, interacts with it and moves it forward. Second by showing that just as Gen 4 is the matrix of mythos, so it is also the matrix of motifs. Many important themes in Genesis start in this chapter. And thirdly I'll do a quick extrapolation to demonstrate how the tension introduced in Gen 4 may resonate in the rest of the book and I will suggest a possible way in which the complication resolves into dénouement at the end.

#### *Reading Gen 4 in Relation to Gen 3*

Several authors, especially Hauser, Walsh and Wenham; have pointed out the similarity in overall structure between Gen 4 and Gen 2-3.<sup>4</sup> You can see Walsh's scheme in the handout I've provided. I would like to take this scheme a little further by pointing out that there are specific sentences or clauses from Gen 3 that, with one exception (see handout), get repeated in Gen 4 in the same order they appear in Gen 3. You can see this in the chart on the flip side. (In my chart, I've used the same textual divisions that Walsh used but with abbreviated titles so my Hebrew clauses would fit the columns.) I'd like to suggest that the phrase which appears out of order ("you must master it," 4:7) is important because, of all the phrases, it is the one most strikingly similar to the Gen 3 phrase. Note the syntax of the clause and the word "desire" (תִּשְׁוֹקָה) occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible. So this clause, out of order and fronted serves as a kind of trigger. It suggests that we need to pay close attention, there may be some other things that repeat themselves in this chapter. That is, it triggers our reading Gen 4 in light of Gen 3. When we do that, we pay more attention to similarities and differences and both are telling.

First let us look at the similarities. What happened in Gen 3 is happening again. Adam and Eve gave into sin, God cursed them and banished them from his garden. The same thing happens again with Cain (and not Abel). Cain falls to temptation just as Adam and Eve did, is cursed by God and is banished from his presence. The story is repeating itself and this repetition is really bad news when read in the context of the plot. Cain is potentially the seed of the woman that could lead us back to God's creation-sanctuary but by failing to master sin, he fails to fulfill that role. And there again is that clause that we said triggers our reading Gen 4 in light of Gen 3. It turns out to be the key clause because it not only alerts us to read Gen 4 in light of Gen 3 it is the crux of the plot of Gen 4—it tells us what must happen in order for Cain to successfully fulfill the role of the seed that will take us back to God's creation-sanctuary. "Sin is crouching at your door, its desire is for you, but you must master it. That's the complication for Gen 4. Will Cain master sin?"

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Jon Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links Between Genesis 4:1-16 and Genesis 2-3," *JETS* 23 (1980): 297-305; Jerome T. Walsh, "Genesis 2:4b-3:24: A Synchronic Approach," *JBL* 96 (1977): 161-77; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Nashville: Nelson, 1987).

The differences between Gen 3 and 4 are also interesting. Cain receives a curse that is similar to Adam's but different. In Adam's case, *the ground* is cursed because of him (3:17) but in Cain's case, *he* is cursed from the ground (4:11). Adam will still eat the fruit of his labor (3:17-19) but the land will produce no fruit for Cain, even though he work the ground (4:12). Similarly, God casts Adam and Eve out of the garden to the east (3:23-24) and now from there, Cain is cast to the east (4:12, 16), and so further from the creation-sanctuary and the presence of God.

In other words, the Gen 4 plot-structure ends unhappily and Cain cannot be the seed that will take us back to God's creation-sanctuary because he is banished just as were Adam and Eve and more so. The rest of the chapter outlines the degree to which Cain and his line have sunk into violence and his genealogy serves to set his line off from rest.

### *Matrix of motifs*

So that was a demonstration of how Gen 4 interacts with the plot set in motion in Gen 3. Now we turn to Gen 4 as the matrix of motifs for Genesis.

If the Cain and Abel narrative sets the plot of Genesis in motion, then it would make sense if it also introduced some or many of the themes that dominate the book. I can only very quickly mention these themes and point to some key instances.

We can begin with the two themes that create the complication of the plot. The first is the righteousness of the seed and the second is the survival of the seed. These two themes are not just mentioned in Gen 4 but they are **brought into coordinated relationship**. Specifically, the unrighteousness of the seed threatens the survival of the seed. As it turns out these two themes and their relationship play a key role in all of the major narrative sections of Genesis. For example, in Gen 6 the wickedness of humanity is so great that God determined to wipe out man (6:5). That's definitely a case of the unrighteousness of the seed threatening the survival of the seed. We can see something similar in Abraham, Jacob and Joseph where the theme of the unrighteousness of the seed threatening the survival of the seed comes up in each case. As another specific example, in the two Abrahamic wife-sister stories (Gen 12, 20) Abram/Abraham behaves unrighteously by passing off Sarai/Sarah as his sister and in doing so he threatens not just the survival of his line but the fulfillment of God's promise to him. I think that when we compare the two narratives, that becomes especially clear. In the first narrative, since there's no clear judgment of Abram's act, some might argue that the unrighteousness of his behavior is not explicit in the text. I still think it's there but I grant that it's not exactly on the surface. Also, you could argue that his line is not directly threatened because there might be other avenues for his seed to continue. For example through Lot or through relations with another woman. In the second narrative his unrighteousness and the threat is more clear. It may be still implicit but I think it is stark that Abraham doubts anyone in Gerar fears the Lord but it turns out Abimelech does fear the Lord and Abraham does not. Also, in Gen 17 it became explicit that Sarah is to be the mother of the seed and so in Gen 20 the survival of not just the seed, but the promised seed is very much in jeopardy. So the unrighteousness of the seed threatens the survival of the seed.

And we could look at other narratives, we could look at Sodom and Gomorrah, we could look at Isaac and his wife-sister story in Gen 26 which I think picks up on the first two and brings the whole

question of the unrighteousness of the seed into play in the Isaac תולדות or the Jacob narrative. Similarly, the righteousness of Jacob seems to be a question that drives the tension of his narrative and, of course, the unrighteousness of Joseph's brothers threatens his survival and, I would argue, the survival of the seed as a whole.

These two themes might be seen as the main themes in the book but other themes that have their origin in Gen 4 are related to these themes as well. For example, there is the distinction between lines. Not every line belongs to the line of the promised seed. Abel yes—Cain no. Isaac yes—Ishmael no. Jacob yes—Esau no. The distinction between lines also shows up in the genealogies as they separate out a particular line that is the line of promise using a similar genealogical mechanism as found in Gen 4 where we have a segmented genealogy for the excluded line and a linear genealogy (though short) for the line of promise.<sup>5</sup> So now we can see how these themes not only originate and are not only brought into relationship in Gen 4 but also precursor the תולדות structure for the book.

The distinction between lines is related to the idea of the preference for the non-primogeniture which also supports the idea that one is not automatically in the line of promise. Instead, what is important is righteousness. This of course would also be related to the theme of animosity between brothers or lines (Sarah/Hagar, Jacob/Esau, Rachel/Leah, Joseph/brothers).

Finally, this chapter picks up a motif from chapter three that is reinforced and brought into relationship with the motifs already mentioned—that is the banishment and movement away from the presence of God. Here the motif is related specifically to our expectations that the promised seed will help us return to God's presence. When the seed fails to be so, then it not only fails to move us closer to God's presence but moves us further from it.

Thus it is possible to see that not only do many of the prominent themes of Genesis have their origin in Gen 4 but they are also brought into well coordinated relationship.

### *Overview*

And now for my third line of support I will suggest a possible movement toward dénouement for the book.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Several authors have pointed to the narrowing function of the genealogies in Genesis. Otto Eißfeldt, "Biblos Geneseōs," in *Gott Und Die Götter; Festgabe Für Erich Fascher Zum 60. Geburtstag* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1958), 33; Kevin Rev O. F. M. Cap Smyth, "The Prophecy Concerning Judah: Gen. 49:8–12," *CBQ* 7 (1945): 290–305; Josef Scharbert, "Der Sinn Der Toledot-Formel in der Priesterschrift," in *Wort, Gebot, Glaube. Beiträge Zur Theologie Des Alten Testaments. Walther Eichrodt Zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Walther Eichrodt et al., *Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments* Bd. 59 (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1970), 45–56; T. Desmond Alexander, "From Adam to Judah: The Significance of the Family Tree in Genesis," *EvQ* 61 (1989): 5–19.

<sup>6</sup>The specifics I have mentioned here are argued in detail in my unpublished dissertation but the plausibility of them is, I believe, suggested by a general understanding of the book. Patterson, "The Righteousness and Survival of the Seed."

If we divide the rest of the book (Gen 5-50) into the main narratives using the תולדות scheme then we have the accounts of Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. In the Noah account, as we have already briefly seen, Noah is righteous in his generation and so he, in a sense, saves humanity, and all of creation as a result. For Abraham, the narrative paints him as righteous as credited to him by faith (15:6) and in contrast to Lot, but his righteousness is also questioned by the wife-sister narratives. For him, at the peak of his unrighteousness, after the second wife-sister story, God puts him to a test, which he passes by being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen 22). This is an especially poignant narrative because it plays on the theme of the unrighteousness of the seed threatening the survival of the seed. In this case, Abraham, by demonstrating that he fears God, actually puts his seed at risk until the angel intervenes. I think that narrative irony is what increases the tension and serves as the peripeteia that brings the Abraham narrative to a climactic dénouement.

Things are not so clear with Jacob. At the end of his narrative we might question whether or not the seed is righteous, whether or not it will survive, and whether or not it even matters (maybe this suggestion for the plot-structure is wrong).<sup>7</sup> In fact, the unclarity of the status of Jacob puts my reading in jeopardy, except I argue this ambiguity is another narrative ploy.

In other words, it should be seen as setting us up for dramatic climax as the Joseph narrative in chapters 37-38 brings absolute clarity to these very questions. First, Joseph's brothers, looking as jealous as Cain, seek to kill the favored younger brother. They, like Cain, are definitely not mastering sin. Gen 37 makes it clear, the line is not righteous. Will it survive? So far, nothing has happened to the brothers. Does righteousness matter anymore? Next comes the Judah and Tamar narrative where God explicitly intervenes to put an end to the unrighteousness of two of Judah's sons. We don't know what Er did, but we do know what Onan did and Judah himself is guilty of the same unrighteousness as Onan because he also withholds his seed from Tamar. Tamar successfully engages in a scheme that results in her pregnancy. Now, carrying Judah's seed, Judah calls for her to be brought out and burned. And now in this climactic moment, Judah's unrighteousness is very much putting at risk the survival of his own seed, but it is saved because of Tamar's successful plot. When he recognizes that he himself is the father, that she is pregnant with his own seed, he declares, "She is more righteous than I," thus acknowledging his deficiency and, from a narrative perspective, putting into play once again the narrative theme that the unrighteousness of the seed threatens the survival of the seed.

And now back to the Joseph narrative. Is the seed unrighteous? Yes! Does it matter? Yes!

At this point in the narrative it is clear that the seed is unrighteous and that its survival is at risk. In the end, Judah, like Abraham, passes Joseph's test a sort of test of righteousness by being

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<sup>7</sup>Most interpreters of the Jacob story find a "turning point" in the character of Jacob when he changes from being a trickster to a worshiper of YHWH. I argue that there is no actual turning point. Other authors who seem more skeptical of Jacob's character include John E. Anderson, "Jacob, Laban, and a Divine Trickster? The Covenantal Framework of God's Deception in the Theology of the Jacob Cycle," *PRSt* 36 (2009): 3-23; Kevin Anthony Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown: The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative*, Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003); Timothy Lee Simpson, "An Analysis of Gen 32:23-33 as a Unit and as Placed Within the Jacob Cycle" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999).

willing to take the place of his brother in slavery. It's interesting, he's given the same opportunity that the brothers had in chapter 37. That is the opportunity to send their out brother into slavery in Egypt. This time, however, no cover up would be necessary, Joseph himself gave them justification by planting the cup. They could send Benjamin into slavery and no one, not even they themselves, would know that they were doing wrong and that this deed was connected to the first. When Judah steps in, he does indeed do what is righteous and brings the plot to dénouement as the seed is shown to have salvaged its righteousness.

Ultimately, however, this is not what saves the seed. In the Joseph narrative this drama of righteousness and survival takes place in the context of a "worldwide" famine. The seed is ultimately saved, ironically, because it did what was unrighteous when sending Joseph into slavery. In the final scene, when the brothers come to Joseph to ask for forgiveness, Joseph replies that even though they meant it for evil, God meant it for good. And so this ties into the plot-structure and brings it to its dramatic conclusion. Throughout the book, the unrighteous of the seed followed a trajectory until it ended with a kind of unrighteousness very much like the unrighteousness of Cain when the brothers seek to kill Joseph. But, despite the unrighteousness of the seed, the plot structure points to the fact that God himself will insure its survival.

The end.

## Handout

Structural	Genesis 2-3 <sup>8</sup>	Genesis 4 <sup>9</sup>
Introduction of characters	2:4-25	4:1-5
Struggle with sin	3:1-5	4:6-7
Act of sin	3:6-8	4:8
YHWH (God) confronts	3:9-13	4:9
YHWH (God) judges	3:14-19	4:10-15
The effects	3:20-24	4:16
Cain's line	(4:1)	4:17-24
Seth's line		4:25-26

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<sup>8</sup>These textual divisions follow the structure identified by Walsh except that the creation of man and woman are grouped together in one section as are the dialogue between the serpent and the woman and the eating from the tree in 3:1-5 and 6-8. Also, Walsh's structure excludes 3:20-21. Walsh, "Genesis 2:4b-3:24: A Synchronic Approach," 161-162.

<sup>9</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 99. The divisions of Gen 4 follow Wenham's structure which parallels Walsh's structure for Gen 2-3. In Wenham's division of Gen 4 narrative and dialogue alternate as follows: verses 2b-5 narrative, 6-7 dialogue, 8 dialogue/narrative, 9-14 dialogue, 15-16 narrative. See also Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1:1-11:26*, The New American Commentary 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 263. Collin's and Auffret's differs only slightly, see Pierre Auffret, *La sagesse a bâti sa maison: Études de structures littéraires dan l'Ancien Testament et spécialement dans les Psaumes*, Orbis biblicus et orientalis 49 (Fribourg, Suisse: Éditions Universitaires, 1982), 48; C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishers, 2006), 191. For Auffret's slightly different comparison of the texts see, Auffret, *La sagesse a bâti sa maison*, 61.



Narrative Structure	Genesis 2-3		Genesis 4	
Characters	--	--	--	--
Struggle			4:7	וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשְׁקָטוּ וְאֶתְּהָ תִּמְשַׁלְ-בוּ
Sin	--	--	--	--
Confrontation	3:9	אֵיכָּה	4:9	אִי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ
	3:13	מִה־זֹאת עָשִׂיתָ		
Judgment			4:10	מָה עָשִׂיתָ
	3:16	וְאֵל-אִשְׁךָ תִּשְׁקָטְךָ וְהוּא יִמְשַׁלְ-בְּךָ		
	3:17	אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוּרְךָ בְּעֵצָבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ	4:11-12	וְעַתָּה אָרוּר אֶתְּהָ מִן הָאֲדָמָה ... כִּי תֵעָבֵל אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה לֹא־תִסַּף תִּת־כֹּחָהּ לָךְ
Effects	3:24a	וַיִּגְרַשׁ אֶת־הָאָדָם	4:14	הֵן גִּרְשִׁיתָ אֹתִי הַיּוֹם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה
	3:24b	וַיֵּשְׁבוּ מִקֶּדֶם לְגֹן־עֵדֶן אֶת־הַכְּרִיבִים	4:16	וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ־נוֹד קְדַמ־תֵּעֵדֶן
Cycle continues	4:1	וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת־חַוָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ	4:17	וַיֵּדַע קַיִן אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ