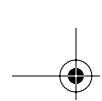


IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED HUMANS WHO would choose freely, in the image of a God who chooses freely. In the beginning, the self-promoting choices of Adam and Eve are chief among the normal and destructive ways of being in the world. The episode has little to do with conventional notions of forbidden fruit. Along with their son Cain, then Lamech and the builders at Babel, our "First Couple" succumb to the normal but insidious whisperings of the heart. Pssst, goes the serpent. Wouldn't you like to be noticed more? To be like that someone over there who is greater? Like God, in fact? God doesn't force humans to choose better. God so regrets the destructiveness of human choice that nearly the entire race is erased. But the new human race, beginning with Noah, also fails. The failure of each "race" emphasizes what once was. Where humans had been at ease with God, now there is hiding. Where the human couple had enjoyed a marriage in which neither partner was in authority over the other, now the wife and husband reap the whirlwind of their desire by experiencing the curse of having the husband rule over the wife. What the prologue of Genesis points to is the need for something new from both God and humankind if the individual is to be made whole, marriages recovered, and peoples of the earth blessed. Only with radical change of what's normal will companionability be recovered between human and human, and between human and God.





1

I WANT A NAME FOR MYSELF

Genesis 1–11



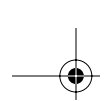
MY LITERATURE STUDENTS HAVE NO PROBLEM GOING THROUGH the account of creation given in the opening chapter of Genesis, but they falter badly when they find a second creation account in the very next chapter, one that seems to contradict aspects of the first, and has its own peculiarities. The first creation story is familiar to them. It's clear and orderly, a prose poem with a wonderful refrain. Here's how it begins:



When God began to create heaven and earth,
and the earth then was welter and waste
and darkness over the deep
and God's breath hovering over the waters,
God said, "Let there be light."
And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good. . . .
And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night.
And it was evening and it was morning, first day.
(1:1-5, my line arrangement)

Everything is completely harmonious in this first creation account. Its poetry of phrasing comes through even in translation. Furthermore, each of the six days is like a separate stanza with a similar for-





mula: God said, Let there be . . . and so it was . . . and God saw that it was good. God's six days of activity culminate in the human being.

And God created the human in his image,
in the image of God He created him,
male and female He created them. (1:27)

God blesses the humans, challenging them to procreate, and assigning to them a stewardship role over creation (no violence, of course—their diet, in fact, is to be vegetarian). Then we find a superlative added to the refrain: “And God saw all that He had done, and look, it was *very good*” (1:28-31, emphasis mine).

This far into the text, my students have no problem. They notice fairly easily—these are very good readers—that the first three days are paralleled with the second three days (such parallelism is a hallmark of Hebrew poetry). On the first day, Night is separated from Day; the fourth day, Night and Day reappear with Night receiving moon and stars, Day getting the sun. The second day is echoed by the fifth day: the sea-water and rain-water of day two get appropriate inhabitants on the fifth day, sea-life for the sea waters and rain-life, the birds, for the rain waters. Similarly, vegetable-life for land in day three gets its counterpart in day six—“crawling things and wild beasts” (1:25).

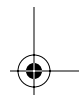


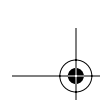
One Creation Account—and Then Another: Why?

Then comes a radically different perspective. My students wonder about the confusing order of events in a second version of creation, and what it all can mean:

On the day the LORD God made earth and heavens, no shrub of the field being yet on the earth and no plant of the field . . . then the LORD God fashioned the human, [*earthling from earth,*] and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature. . . . And the LORD God said, “It is not good for the human to be alone, I shall make him a sustainer beside him.” And the LORD God fashioned from the soil each beast of the field and each fowl of the heavens and brought each to the human. (2:5, 7, 18-19)¹

¹Italicized portion suggested by W. G. Plaut. As Plaut points out, the Hebrew is a play on words, *adam* from *adamah*—the human being from earth (W. G. Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* [New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1981], p. 29).





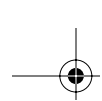
How can it be, my students ask—as I still do!—that animals come on stage in this account only *after* the human has been fashioned and given life? And how can it be that we hear God saying, “it is *not* good”? This is God, some will insist, so how can it be “not good”?

I encourage the questions, suggesting that the biblical writer wants our engagement, our own “co-creating” efforts in having the story make sense. We have heard the refrain, for example, “It is good, it is good, it is very good,” yet now we hear God’s words, “It is not good.” Tuned ears, as those of the original audience certainly would have been, could not have missed the importance of the “not good.” And the text is clear enough: God steps back and views the scene, and decides that it is not good because the human creature is alone. This is fundamental, then, about human nature. Being alone: not good. So what, I ask, does God do about the companion problem? With only rare exception, the answer comes back, God makes Eve.

Wrong, I urge; look at the text again, and don’t flinch. Let yourself be bothered. “And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the human to be alone, I shall make him a sustainer beside him.’ And the LORD God fashioned from the soil each beast of the field and each fowl of the heavens and brought each to the human” (2:18-19).

In puzzling over this animal business, my students become involved and excited. For a suitable companion, a sustainer beside him, God comes up with animals. The biblical text involves us by inviting us to consider the obvious dilemma. Yes, a dog can be a very good and loyal friend. But no, there’s a reason why a dog—or a bear—*can’t* be a true companion, a “best friend.” It’s right there in the Hebrew, which our translation captures: *ezer kenegdo*, sustainer-beside-him (“partner,” NRSV). I always wait until one of my students, almost always timidly, wonders if maybe the animals-as-partners idea isn’t intended—by God and the writer—to show that, well, a human can’t “rule over” someone and at the same time be that someone’s best and most ideal friend. That is, no matter how close a relationship is formed between hunter in pick-up truck and black lab beside him, the dog will ultimately be unsuitable as the man’s





ezer kenegdo, “sustainer-beside-him.”²

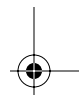
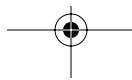
God sees the problem, of course: “But for the human no sustainer beside him was found.” Perhaps, argues Terence Fretheim, the human “does not accept what God presents [the animals]; God accepts the human decision and goes back to the drawing board.”³ In any case, “the LORD God cast a deep slumber on the human,” and only then does the solitary and lonely human creature—up until now ambiguous in gender—become two separate and emphatically sexual creatures, male and female (*ish* and *ishah*, 2:21-23).⁴ The most delicate and reciprocal friendship is created: husband and wife. They become “one flesh,” so excellent is the fit. How better to express the meaning of *ezer kenegdo*, a power suitable or equal to, than to have animals be the first and delightful but finally inadequate companion for the lonely human? Human being for human being, a friendship based on reciprocity and complete mutuality. This dramatic focus of the second creation account is its “point”—a focus on what it means to be most fully human. Such a focus couldn’t possibly have registered with such power if included within one comprehensive creation account. What does it mean to be human, then, to be created “in God’s image?” The second account gets to the fundamentals: to be human, in God’s image, is to not be alone. To be most fully human is

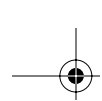


²After tales of marriage disappointments, stemming mostly from rivalry in “who rules,” the late medievalist Geoffrey Chaucer concludes with a portrait of perfect marriage in which the husband vows to his wife “that never in all his life, by day or night, / would he take authoritarian role over her” because, as the generous and ideal host the Franklin argues, “There is one thing, sirs, I can safely say: / that those bound by love must obey each other / if they are to keep company long. / Love will not be constrained by mastery; / when mastery comes, the god of love at once beats his wings, and farewell—he is gone” (Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Franklin’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales* [New York: Bantam, 1964], p. 297).

³Terence Fretheim, *Genesis*, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p. 352.

⁴The Midrash (collected Jewish commentaries from the exile period to about 1200 C.E.) goes so far as to suggest that “Man and woman were originally undivided, i.e., Adam [translated “the human being”] was at first created bisexual, a hermaphrodite” (Plaut, *Torah*, p. 33). The biblical writer waits until the rib scene to unveil the gender terms for female and male (*ishah* and *ish*, 2:21-23). “*Ha adam*,” which usually denotes “the human” (or *adam*, “human”), acquires an exclusively male reference after the rib scene in 2:23. The proper name “Adam” does not appear until much later, perhaps as late as chapter 5.





to find as mutual a companion-spirit as possible.

Woman's curse, which follows almost immediately, reinforces the ideal of reciprocity and mutuality: "And for your man shall be your longing," God says, "[yet] he shall rule over you" (3:16). That no sort of one-way submission could be part of the Ideal Marriage is underscored by what is lost. The wife, now, must submit to the ruling husband. This is part of the "curse."

The focus of the second creation account is on the human condition, and on God's intimate connection with what the human most fundamentally needs. In the first creation account, the dramatic energy hovers around God, and on God's majestic control—speaking all into existence with poetic precision. This is *Elohim*, God of gods. The God of the second account has a different name and wears a different face. This is *Yahweh Elohim*—a more personal God. Yahweh comes down from on high to fashion the human and animals from mud, and then finds ways to accommodate human need. The one God in two aspects couldn't have been dramatized any more succinctly and powerfully than by having these two accounts of creation side by side.

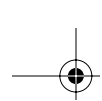
Every once in a while, a perceptive student will note that the first account of creation ends in blessing—"And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, for on it He had ceased from all His work that He had done" (2:3)—while the second ends with human wrong-doing and curse. We look next at the dynamics of wrong-doing: What does it mean to be normal, and so wrong in that normalcy? The story of Eve's and Adam's wrong and destructive choice-making is the story of Everyman and Everywoman.⁵

Fear and Needing a Name (2:5–3:24)

Eve has everything survival requires, and then some. She is pictured by the biblical writer as inhabiting an environment so ecologically ideal that in no instance does life feed off the taking of life. Animals eat grass, not each other. Best of all possible harmonized worlds, life sus-

⁵From the beginning of this second account, as Michael Fishbane sees it, "Man' here is 'everyman' " (Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* [New York: Schocken, 1979], p. 18).



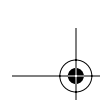


tains itself by furthering life: in the pruning of fruit trees and other vegetation, for example, our first parents are nourished. It is all so lovely. Work and play are one and the same thing, a tending to animals who are friends—certainly not for eating!—and to a garden habitat yielding occupation, nutrition and pleasure simultaneously. Woman and man enjoy each other as perfectly matched companions; theirs is a reciprocity of relationship reflecting the perfection of a God who said, “Let us make them in our image.” There is, in such a world, no death. In the breezy time of day God comes for a walk in the garden (3:8). Here, God and the couple are apparently accustomed to visiting together in a state of easy harmony.

Somehow, into this world of no-fear and all-joy a very wise serpent has insinuated himself. The serpent discovers, and works to advantage, the most subtle and sophisticated anxiety known to the human species. This is the fear that, no matter how well endowed I am with all manner of personal and environmental good, it is not enough. Someone else has it better, or *is* better, an uneasiness that gnaws like an aching tooth.

The serpent wonders aloud, in front of Eve, about God’s injunction against eating fruit from *any* tree in the garden (3:2). No, Eve answers, that’s not what God forbids—just not to touch the *one* tree “in the midst of the garden” (3:3). Eve is clever in correcting the serpent—or so the serpent lets her think. Well, the serpent goes on, surely there is great and glorious possibility in that tree, the furthest thing from death! You shall live as a god! *That’s* what God wishes to withhold from you, godlikeness (3:4-5). Perhaps Eve is already assured of her own cleverness by correcting the serpent’s wily rhetorical “mistake” about *any* tree: might she now presume to correct God? Or perhaps it’s more complicated, a matter of pride compensating for insecurity. Maybe she is not so assured, after all. She would have to be anxious about her state as just plain old Eve to be so tempted, to go beyond her creaturely limits as the woman God created her to be. Is Eve simply wanting greater knowledge, perhaps a knowing that is, in part, sexual? The text seems fairly clear: “The promise ‘to be like God,’” as Claus Westermann understands, “is not something over and above knowledge, but describes it and all that it is capable of. *It is concerned with a divine and unbridled*





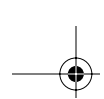
*ability to master one's existence.*⁶ In her fear of being less than that someone over there—someone divine in mastering one's own existence—she is just like any of us.

Take the fruit, the serpent urges in its last word, and “become as gods knowing good and evil.” (3:5) Eve's yes to the serpent's deadly tease is a no to who she was created to be. Adam is led to the same choice by Eve. As happens later with Cain, and still later with the Babel-builders, Eve and Adam are exiled, cast out from their comfort zones. Attempting to secure significance of name and place, they end up diminished as human beings, and without a place of their own. And this first couple is “exiled” from each other, insofar as Eve and Adam experience a new gulf between them. “Your yearning shall be for your husband,” God laments, “yet he will lord it over you” (3:16 JB). Does saying “God laments” stretch the point? I think not. This is a curse, a sad result of the prior human choice to be greedy, to go beyond the boundaries of who I am created to be, at my fullest potential—to be like that someone else I deem greater, to be like God. God wants blessing, and created us for the blessing of male and female, one flesh, companions with nothing of the rule-over implicit in human-animal relationships. God's curse is not God's ideal. The further question, of course, is, What are the characters who fill out the pages of Genesis to make of this ideal-turned-curse? Do they simply live with the curse?

What God had wanted was a good world in which humans would find their highest good in a balanced partnership with one another, as in marriage, and also in partnership with God—taking care of the garden in which God delighted. In fact, God could be found “walking about in the garden in the evening breeze” (3:8), but after the disastrous choice of Eve and Adam there is great loss. At the tranquil garden-hour when “the LORD God called to the human ‘Where are you?’” there comes only the frightened voice of the human, “I was afraid . . . and I hid” (3:9-10). And now, the husband rules over the wife. What God had wanted for this most ideal of friendships between humans, an

⁶Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 248, emphasis mine.





intimacy based on reciprocity, is severely diminished. *Where are you?* The textual point here is that of loss and fear, of hiding and being shut out from closeness with God. And between the married couple there can be no longer an easy and equal exchange of spirit. Companionability becomes problematic not only between human and God, but between human and human as well.

Free to choose, the humans choose to ignore God by trying to become like the gods—to be like that someone over there who is greater. Still, God is gracious, giving humans a responsibility “to till the soil from which he had been taken” (3:23)—just as before, when “the LORD God took the human and set him down in the garden of Eden to till it and watch it” (2:15). But now there will be “thorn and thistle,” and “with pangs shall you eat from it all the days of your life” (3:17, 18). Eve and Adam have chosen what will be forever the normal choice of self-aggrandizement, and so bring curse upon themselves.

And from where do such normal choices arise? Is it not fear? Again: this is an anxiety that no matter how well endowed I am with all manner of personal and environmental good, it is not enough. A perceptive friend reflected, here, on this matter of fear:

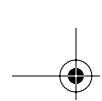
Sometimes we think there's an evil seed (usually labeled pride or rebelliousness) down deep in every person—that we're just unaccountably bad. It's not simply pride, but fear, felt helplessness, vulnerability. We humans are scared, underneath it all. We're not merely bad, prideful beings, but scared, cowering beings doing what we think we have to do to survive.⁷

Yes. I want a name for myself, but not for anything frivolous: it's a matter often of life over against death—the fear of death, of not counting, of no name, no significance.

From their fear-based choice to be more than they were created to be, Adam and Eve are exiled from the Ideal State, just as the later people of God, the Israelites, will experience their own exile from the Land of Promise, where they will rehearse the details of this first loss, this first exile. Is exile forever? Is there never to be a return to the ideal intimacies and pleasures of Eden, and to the land of promise?

⁷Doug Frank, in a letter of response to this chapter and later chapters, April 25, 2000.



**I Refuse to Be Number Two (4:1-22)**

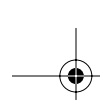
Adam and Eve have two sons, but one kills the other, sounding a note we have heard ringing ever since. Cain does lethal mischief to Abel because the younger brother has taken over as “number one.” Cain has been reduced, he thinks, to number two standing, since God has favored younger brother Abel. Being displaced proves intolerable for Cain.

The universality and seriousness of the mischief and its occurrence so early in the Bible’s first book have given this very short tale a prominent place among the best known classics of literature. However little my students may know about biblical or world literature, hardly any haven’t heard about Cain’s murder of Abel. Even after a careful reading, however, most students remain hazy about its dramatic focus. The story is not about God’s obvious favoritism or what was wrong with Cain’s gift.

Immediately after being given notice of their birth, we read that “Abel became a herder of sheep while Cain was a tiller of the soil” (4:1). Neither vocation is stated as superior to the other. Cain the farmer brings a gift of farm goods to his heavenly parent. Similarly, Abel the younger brother, a herdsman, brings a gift from the herd to God. The heavenly parent likes Abel’s gift, but not Cain’s. We don’t know why this is so, except possibly for a detail not dwelt on by the story, that Abel brought “from the choice firstlings of his flock,” while Cain “brought from the fruit of the soil” (4:3-4). Was there old fruit or not-yet-ripened vegetable in Cain’s cornucopia? Passing over any possible interest in why God favors Abel’s offering, the story moves on quickly, as the reader should.⁸ The dramatic focus emerges: an exploration of Cain’s response to rejection, and God’s response to the depressed Cain.

⁸Claus Westermann has it right: “The point of departure is equality; both have the means of subsistence in the division of labor. Both recognize the giver in their gifts and therefore both are linked with the power which is the source of blessing. Now inequality enters in; it has its origin in the regard of God. Blessing or its absence depends on the regard of God. It is a misunderstanding of the real meaning to look for the reason for the inequality of God’s regard. The narrator wants to say that in the last analysis there is something inexplicable in the origin of this inequality. It does not consist in application, in attitude or in any circumstance that one can control. When such inequality between equals arises, it rests on a decision that is beyond human manipulation. The reason why God regards Abel’s sacrifice and not Cain’s must remain without explanation. And the narrator wants to make clear that this is one of the decisive motifs for conflict wherever there are brothers” (Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 297).





Cain was very incensed, and his face fell. And the LORD said to Cain,

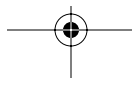
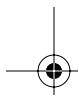
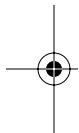
“Why are you incensed,
and why is your face fallen?
For whether you offer well,
or whether you do not,
at the tent flap sin crouches
and for you is its longing
but you will rule over it.” (4:5-7)

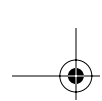
The question is rhetorical. In effect, God is asking, “Why do you let the past affect your present?” What follows is a bit of reality therapy: “Live in the present; do well, and you will be OK—guaranteed, because I God promise it.” What could be more clear, more reassuring? But God senses the depth of Cain's hurt, and his need for affirmation: “If you dwell in the past and do not do well, be on your guard—there lurks a horror that you must control, lest it consume you.” That is, Cain has choices. He is not doomed to be second rate in God's eyes nor in his own. To be declared OK by God is to be OK, period. But the ball is in his court. What will he do? He's had nothing less than a divine coach. This encouragement from God, and the responsibility given Cain to choose right or wrong, are the heart of the little drama, its focus.

“Cain's reaction is normal and justified,” as Claus Westermann understands; “without reason he is disadvantaged and rejected. His outburst and his sullenness are the corresponding reactions.” Alter translates God's words here as “For whether you offer well, / or whether you do not,” but Westermann's translation fits the context better: “if you conduct yourself correctly (if you do well), then there is ‘lifting up’ (of the countenance).”⁹ That is, all depends on Cain's attitude. He can lift up his face (again) if he does well. The note of warning will therefore make clear to Cain that it depends on him. The warning points to the alternative: “If you do not do well . . .”

Cain's need is the universal and normal desire to be accepted, which so often translates into being better than at least one other person—in order to be noticed. In Cain's eyes, Abel seems to have been viewed as better than he by no less a one than God. Solution? Destroy

⁹Ibid., pp. 298-99.



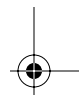
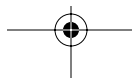


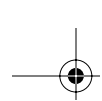
number one, and move up. Abel is killed by Cain. Such a need is voracious, all-consuming, the “beast” at Cain’s tent door—just as it became for Eve in her grasping after the promised superiority. Eve has no one better than she, except God. Be, then, like God! As in Eve’s case, Cain is presented with a choice. We choose, most of us and almost always, from that deep need to be accepted, to be OK, to be, at least in our little corner, the Best.

How far will this freedom be allowed to go? Will God allow Cain’s choice to murder Abel? Will Adam and Eve then need to live out their days with the untimely death of their son hanging over them? Do they not have the right, or at least the reason, to ask, “Can’t God *do* something?” God does what God can do: before the deed, God comes to Cain with whispers of good counsel and comfort.

Eve, Adam and their son Cain share a radical need to be noticed that leads to arrogance and defiant action. Wrongdoing becomes a violation of their own beings, and they are cursed with the logical consequences of their own preening. Far from being like a god, Eve labors in giving birth; from being the reciprocal female counterpart to male, created in God’s image (1:27), Eve now suffers her husband’s rule. Now Cain loses his farmland and any comfort he could have enjoyed in his family relationships. Now he will be everyone’s stranger, not noticed by anyone except as a possible object for harm. “Now that You have driven me this day from the soil,” Cain complains to God, “and I must hide from Your presence, I shall be a restless wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me” (4:14). God puts a mark on Cain to prevent anyone’s killing him (4:15), but Cain will suffer that which he brought on himself. Demanding to be noticed by God, he will have to hide from the divine presence; insisting on being accepted to the point of killing, he will wander without any acceptance at all, an alien.

We all want to be accepted, and perhaps there’s nothing wrong with that. It seems innocuous enough. But the need for acceptance is on a spectrum that includes the desire to be noticed, to be thanked, to be approved of, to be considered really important, to be thought of as better than another . . . and so forth. Rather than being at peace with thinking and doing the right thing for its own sake, for its own intrinsic goodness, we





flounder in thinking and doing those things which others will credit us for, starting with simple acceptance and ending with the lust to be number one. And exactly here is where we run into Lamech, a far worse case of the same emotional-spiritual disease suffered by Eve, Adam, and Cain. He serves as an exclamation point to the plight of Eve and Cain in his foolish and murderous need to be number one, king of the hill.

King of the Hill—Right, My Queens? (4:23-24)

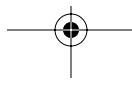
Lamech's tale is a tiny one, powerful in its brevity.

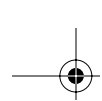
Adah and Zillah, O hearken [to] my voice,
 You wives of Lamech, give ear to my speech.
 For a man have I slain for my wound,
 a boy for my bruising.
 For sevenfold Cain is avenged,
 and Lamech seventy and seven. (4:23-24)

Here's a grown man calling to his wives in order to announce that he is a very superior being. Lamech thinks to enhance his standing, somehow, by refining his boast—not just has he slain a man in revenge for a wound, but a “mere boy” for only a bruise. Even his speech is grand, another example of poetic parallelism.¹⁰

Cain killed to regain standing, perversely, with God: he alone of the two brothers is left to be noticed by the Gift-Receiver. Revenge for any who would murder Cain is established by no less than God, who warns folks off by providing Cain a mark. Revenge will be sevenfold. Things are deteriorating precipitously since the expulsion from Eden. Lamech kills to reinforce standing with his wives, not God; he himself establishes guidelines for revenge should he ever come to harm. The exaggerated brutality of his threat—seventy and seven times as a revenge factor—comports with the brutishness of his self-acclaimed actions and the buffoonery of his chest-pounding.

¹⁰Robert Alter notes that “this poem follows the parallelistic pattern of biblical verse with exemplary rigor. . . . [T]here is a pronounced tendency in the poetry to intensify semantic material as it is repeated in approximate synonymy. Perhaps, then, what Lamech is saying (quite barbarically) is that not only has he killed a man for wounding him, he has not hesitated to kill a mere boy for hurting him” (*Genesis: Translation and Commentary* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1996], p. 20).





God Regrets—Then Starts Afresh

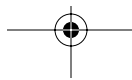
What could God have expected, giving humans their will? It seems the results couldn't have been much worse. In fact, "the LORD regretted having made the human on earth and was grieved to the heart." (6:6). The solution is drastic: "I will wipe out the human race I created from the face of the earth," says the Lord, "for I regret that I have made them" (6:7). So God changes the divine mind about the whole thing. All will be destroyed, back to square one. But wait: God notices that Noah is righteous, and changes direction once again, deciding to start over with another human race and all life itself (6:8-13). A flood wipes the slate clean, except for Noah's family and selected animal specimens.

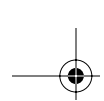
From the start of this second creation there is new promise but new despair. Once again we hear the same basic blessing given to the original humans:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And the dread and fear of you shall be upon all the beasts of the field and all the fowl of the heavens, in all that crawls on the ground and in all the fish of the sea. In your hand they are given. All stirring things that are alive, yours shall be for food, like the green plants. . . . As for you, be fruitful and multiply, swarm through the earth, and hold sway over it. (9:1-7)

So it once was, with nearly the same words and phrasing: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it, and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth" (1:28). But the differences between the first and second blessings are momentous. In the first, only plant life was for eating; in the second—a divine concession?—flesh can be eaten as well. In the first blessing as in the second, humans are to hold sway over all animal life, which similarity only accentuates the dismaying difference, that after Noah there will be "the dread and fear of you" upon all animals.

If it is the case that God makes a concession to humankind, granting that yes, now humans will eat and terrorize those who have been their animal friends, what might explain such a divine "caving in" to human frailty? Perhaps God's accompanying new promise can help to explain a promise repeated a bit later as a covenant with the rainbow





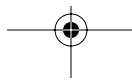
as sign: "I will not again damn the soil on humankind's score," says God. "For the devisings of the human heart are evil from youth. And I will not again strike down all living things as I did" (8:21; 9:12-17). God understands the normal impulses and choices that dominate everyday life—that "the devisings of the human heart are evil from youth." But what changes about God, starting with Abraham and Sarah, is God's refusal to accept such a normal state of human affairs. God will work with humankind to reverse both "normal" and its disastrous consequences, consequences that we recognize as curses.

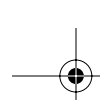
Noah promptly gets drunk "and expose[s] himself within his tent" which leads to further curse, rather than blessing (9:20-25). Such a bad start to a second human race does not bode well, and after a second genealogy of the new nations that "branched out on the earth after the Flood" (10:32), we find a tale at the end of the prologue that indicates that companionability between human and human is utterly lost, along with the ease of communion between human and God.

Let Us Make a Name for Ourselves!

Come, let us build us a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, that we may make us a name, lest we be scattered over all the earth. (11:4)

The nations that "branched out on the earth after the Flood" have one language (10:32, 11:1). They all migrate east to a plain where they make bricks and build a city in order, as they themselves put it, "that we may make us a name" (11:1-4). They are afraid. What is their fear of being "scattered over all the earth"? It is said that in numbers there is safety. The bigger your own tribe, the better the athletes in your high school—*voilà*, the less threat from another tribe, another high school. Babel is a neighborhood like any, full of Cains and Lamechs, Eves and Adams—a grouping together of essentially anxious individuals. The final solution? Build the biggest, the something-really-tall, "a tower with its top in the heavens." The name of their city would become great, surely, and their security assured. But as it was with Eve, Adam, Cain and Lamech, the chaos resulting from Babel's presumptuous choice is precisely the chaos feared in the first place, only greater. Afraid of being scattered and vulnerable? Well then, says God, be





scattered indeed, worldwide—and alienated as well by garbled language. “Therefore [the city] was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth” (11:9).

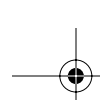
This little story concludes the descent from Edenic paradise begun with the disastrous choice of Eve and Adam to change places with someone greater than they. By the time of Babel, humankind is in an earthly hell. It is all, indeed, a “paradise lost.”

God had shown an intimate side with *ha adam*, the human being, in remedying the aloneness, and later in trying to speak the greatly depressed Cain out of his anger and deep funk. But this God has progressively retreated from any warm regard for the human scene—or so it seems. First, divine regret that anything was created in the first place, followed by world-wide devastation (6:6-7). And now, divine compassion is replaced by divine sarcasm and dispatch. “Come, let us,” say the Babel folks, “let us build us a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, *that we may make us a name*, lest we be scattered over all the earth.” “Come, let us . . .” mimics a displeased God, then zap, the people can’t understand each other, and are scattered all over the earth. So much for a name—and so much for challenging God’s command.

Within a short time, for these Babel folks, their fearful scrambling after a name has led to the utter frustration of their efforts: “And the LORD said, ‘As one people with one language for all, if this is what they have begun to do, nothing they plot will elude them. Come, let us go down and baffle their language there so that they will not understand each other’s language’” (11:6-7). And that’s that. No visit, no conversation, no effort on God’s part other than an ironic and overwhelming tit-for-tat. You want a name? You’ll not even understand each other’s words. You want to gather in a city and be a powerful tribe? Be scattered, lost. It sounds harsh, with no chance for interaction with the human, nor divine hope for or encouragement of human transformation.

The Babel story is the last of four snapshots in the prologue of those who sought in some way to achieve significance rather than usefulness, self-promotion rather than stewardly service. Each desired a name: Eve and Adam; Cain; Lamech; the Babel builders. The implicit fear or inse-



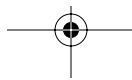


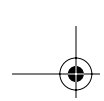
curity behind Babel's arrogance is present in all four. It will be up to God, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, to change direction in establishing partnership with the human. And it will be up to the human—with God's mentoring help—to say yes to change that takes years and years. In the Genesis prologue, God acted unilaterally in promising Noah and his seed that never again would the earth and inhabitants be destroyed by flood (9:11). But starting with Abraham, such covenant-making changes drastically, right from the start. God challenges Abraham to leave home, following with promises that appear contingent on Abraham's actually leaving home! What is implicitly a mutual responsibility—with God always initiating and helping and waiting, of course—becomes explicit by the end of Abraham and Sarah's story. Now, God won't change things without human cooperation, and humans can't change without divine assistance. Only when choosing to grow in partnership with God will the human recover lost companionability with both God and fellow human. That is God's fervent wish.

Noah was born nearly blameless, for all we know. Abraham, the main protagonist of the first major narrative, has to work toward blamelessness through a difficult twenty-five years. "Be blameless," God has to challenge Abraham, in the fifth of their seven visits together (17:1). Noah and Abraham are very much the same: the biblical writer distinguishes each by paralleled terms, "righteousness," "wholeness," and "walking with God." The similarity accentuates their striking difference.

Noah is the prologue's odd man out—as unnatural in his goodness as the others are normal in their self-destructiveness. We'll never know about Noah, about how he came to be so good. God simply finds him that way, noticing him at the eleventh hour as a possibility for starting the human race all over again (6:6-8). But in Abraham, God finds an ordinary man who needs to be taught a better than normal way of going about business. As Martin Buber points out, "God seems to command Abraham to become that which Noah was by nature!" What the biblical writer emphasizes, as Buber points out, is this: "with Abraham what matters is not his character as God finds it, so to speak, but what he does, and what he becomes."¹¹

¹¹Martin Buber, "Abraham the Seer," in *On the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 33.





Genesis is a story that discloses everyday matters of the heart we would rather not see. We are adept at keeping these secrets hidden, even from ourselves. This is the dark reality of Genesis, the heart of Eve and Adam, Cain, Lamech, the Babel builders; of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Judah and Joseph. For each of these, there is striving for position in the world, rather than for usefulness. However subtly, each seeks to promote his or her own name, though at the expense of others' well-being. Families nearly self-destruct with subtle or shocking rivalries and one-upmanship. Such darkness is always threatening a fragile hope, based on the longing of God for blessing. Fragile, yes: for God's will turns out to rest in large measure on the transformation of human will, and on a resulting partnership between God and human. The darkness and the hope come into full view with Abraham and Sarah, in the Bible's first major narrative. At times, their story reads a bit like the evening news with all its suggestions of real life and disjointed sorrow. But it's also a story of change: how much Abraham must change and does change, and how things change for Sarah, and even how God changes. We look next at the earthy trials that Abraham and Sarah fail. They are ordinary persons making normal choices. In subsequent chapters, we will explore the interweaving of divine trials, and how it is that Abraham and Sarah mature toward the ultimate goal of bringing blessing to all peoples.

